

THE PHANTOM BATON

The Field Marshal's baton is the phantom baton which for ever eludes that courageous, tough old soldier, Colonel Boucard. He had fought at Waterloo and now commands the French garrison at Sagun Fort, French Morocco, awaiting his opportunity to corner his old enemy, the Emir, known as "the Leopard". Boucard is perpetually frustrated by General de la Motte's instructions from Oran and knows that the authorities have ceased to trust his own military judgement.

Amongst Boucard's officers are D'Auberon, who had left the Household Cavalry and transferred to Africa for personal reasons, Piatte, whose secret background is so totally different, Hennessy and Zeller, all such contrasting types yet held together by their loyalty to France and to their Commanding Officer.

The story was suggested by an incident in the French campaign of 1845, the disaster of Sidi Brahmin, during the Arab uprising against the French.

In *The Eastern Gale* the author wrote of soldiers in action and here again he shows his considerable skill and gives a vivid picture of this French garrison.

By the same Author

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BLACKFOOT LAGOON (Gryphon Books Ltd.)

THE PHANTOM BATON

BY
JAMES KINROSS

“Every soldier carries a Marshal’s baton in his knapsack.”—*Attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte.*



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FOR
OSYTH LEESTON

CHAPTER 1

FOR several seconds, Colonel Boucard was conscious of his heart, which was throbbing like a drum. It seemed to be throttling him until he sat up suddenly and realised he was still in the airless little room with the familiar cracks running slantwise across the ceiling.

Those flies, he thought, rubbing the gritty sleep out of his eyes. He lay back, staring at the ceiling where the droning black clusters hung like dried raisins, and felt the perspiration like a damp undergarment that clung warm and moist. Then he heaved himself up, resenting the groaning of the iron bedstead, lowered his feet down onto the floor and rested his hands on his knees until the throbbing quietened. After a time he opened his eyes and cautiously surveyed the room. But nothing had changed. His uniform coat lay across the chair, its dull ed epaulettes curiously awry. On the table, a map had rolled itself into a parched cylinder. Like a table napkin, he thought. But when had he seen a table napkin since he came to Africa? He kicked irritably at the unyielding stone, warm in the dusty light that poured through the narrow window.

One of these days he would wake up dead. They'd nail him up in a flimsy box and bury him outside the fort with a few hundred flies for company. Some Zouave would carve a headstone and there he'd be; a permanent member of the garrison. The idea frightened him. It was indecent to end that way. Boucard sighed and began to fumble with the buttons of his damp shirt. It was quiet in the fort; a heavy silence that weighed down as though someone had spread a horsecloth over the walls and he was suffocating inside. With an effort he got to his feet and padded heavily across the room, grunted as he bent to pick up the stone pitcher and poured a stream of lukewarm water over his head. He put the pitcher down and stood a moment, feeling the water trickling down inside his shirt. He was trying to remember what had excited him that morning. But the memory floated

irritatingly somewhere at the back of his brain, and it was not until he was fastening the tricolour sash which he used as a cummerband, that it all came flooding back.

"Gounod." His voice was so loud that it made him jump. "Gounod!" He wrenched open the contraption of worn skins stretched on a wooden framework that did duty for a door and blinked painfully as the fierce sunlight poured in.

"Colonel?" Gounod came stumbling from the tiny room next door; his lugubrious face still creased with sleep. Seeing Boucard, he brought his worn boots smartly together and stood rigidly at attention. Only his eyes moved cautiously; observing the Colonel with veiled but anxious sympathy.

"Gounod. Go and fetch Captain Audincourt. Tell him I want the Arab brought up here. At once." Boucard stared at the leathery face affectionately. "Go on. Hurry!" he shouted, as the lean figure shuffled away in the sunlight.

Captain Audincourt came into the room a few minutes later and saluted stiffly. Beside him, Mahomet the son of Ali waited impassively, his neat brown hands folded motionless on his chest. If only these Arabs showed more emotion, Audincourt thought. But although his eyes were impatient behind the pince-nez, he knew better than to reveal his excitement. He looked fixedly at the Colonel, noting the flushed face and the stern, heavy mouth. Like an old moulting eagle, he thought. But dangerous; the talons still possessed of tremendous power.

"It's much as I told you, sir," he said. "This man knows a great deal, but he won't tell me anything. He's saving it because he wants to talk to you, Colonel. I get the impression that there's something important happening. You know how it is—men like this get the feeling almost before the event occurs."

"Yes, yes," Boucard said quickly, staring at the Arab, who stood quite still.

"Well," he asked in his harsh Arabic, "well, my friend, what news comes across the mountains with the wind?"

"It goes before the wind, Sidi." The Arab took his time

to reply. "I have some news for you," he said at last, looking calmly into Boucard's eyes.

"And you have brought this news to me? Why? Because of the love you bear me? Or is it the thought of gold?" Boucard's voice was hard, needling quietly.

"You know there is no truth in those words." Involuntarily the Arab's mouth tightened.

"Then speak—if it is from the goodness of your heart you come." Boucard stared powerfully into the dark eyes.

"You know, Sidi, that the Leopard killed my family. Though it is many years ago, yet to me it is as yesterday."

"And that is why you come to me?"

The Arab nodded quietly. "But also because you are strong. Only the Roumi, the yellow children, can crush the Leopard. Only they have the guns and fighting men. And I would be there—when the time comes." The man's face was animated now, his mouth narrowed and his liquid eyes suffused with hatred. Boucard nodded calmly. There were many such men; remnants of the tribes which had opposed the Leopard and had been destroyed before the blue columns could pacify the country.

"You shall ride with us when the time comes," he said quietly.

"I have your word?" The bird-like eyes were watching him intently.

"You have my word," Boucard said heavily, conscious that the preliminaries were now finished. He felt a sudden tremor of excitement.

"Then listen, Sidi." The Arab seemed to have laid aside his suspicion, and the words came tossing out, harsh but distinct.

"The Leopard is coming back. Across the border, he has raised the green banner and is enrolling an army. Already his messengers have gone out to the tribes and they are stirring. It is amongst the Duzair that you must expect the trouble to spread."

"The Leopard! How many men are with him?" A cord in Boucard's throat was vibrating; the flies, the boredom, even the evening sun were forgotten.

Three battalions of regulars and some Moroccan tribesmen. But already small bands are joining him from across the frontier."

"You have seen this with your own eyes?" Boucard had a momentary vision of the red-fezzed negroes in the Emir's regular battalions.

"Yes, Sidi. I have seen it."

"And you will return again to bring me more news?"

"Even so."

"You are a brave man." Boucard said softly, "It is vital that I am kept informed. You understand that?"

"If God wills, I shall return to you with news."

"You need gold?"

"I have no need of gold. Only the promise you have given me." The Arab's eyes were searching Boucard's with fierce demand.

"My promise?" Boucard had half forgotten.

"That you will destroy the Leopard."

"A man may make promises it is not easy to keep. You know I am but the servant of a stronger master." Boucard was thinking of de la Motte in Oran. But he can't be such a fool, he thought savagely.

"You are a warrior," the Arab said simply. "Between warriors there is trust. Give me your word, and that will be enough."

"My word," Boucard said heavily, glaring at Audincourt, whose eyes behind the thick glasses watched him closely. "My word," he repeated, wondering bitterly how much it was worth. But deep down, he felt elated, almost a little drunk. The Arab's hatred moved him strangely. They had a bond in common: a mutual desire that could not, must not— He choked suddenly; his throat was dry and burning.

"I give you my word," he said, conscious that Audincourt was staring at him. He put out his hand, felt the light touch as the dark fingers rested in his palm.

CHAPTER 2

COMMANDANT ZELLER sat down on a ledge on the parapet and fished in his tunic pocket for a cigar. Everything seemed blisteringly hot inside the fort. He sighed and blew out his cheeks. It would be like this until the sun sank into the sea where the vividly coloured water seemed to boil and fizzle. The sentries complained the reflection hurt their eyes. But Zeller rather enjoyed it, screwing up his face and thinking of the hours before the moon climbed up and hung above the mountains. That was when it felt good to be alive ; the noise of water splashing into leather buckets, the creak of leather and the stamping from the horse lines, the harsh agreeable sound of men's voices, faintly incredulous, as though they were surprised to find themselves alive at the conclusion of another day.

He heard an agonised creaking as the wooden gates of the fort swung open, and then the sound of hooves, loud at first but dying to a soft padding as the rider negotiated the sand. It must be that Arab. Zeller could hardly control his curiosity. For months there had been no excitement, not even a message from the wooden arms of the telegraph that stood, like the dwarf cousin of a windmill, at one corner of the walls. Only routine patrols and the weekly relief of the garrison at El Oud. Three hundred and fifty men, he thought, cooped up in this tiny stone oven. And why ? Because France must have an Empire. He scratched his nose and began to think nostalgically of Belleville in the Jura. Odd how he had wanted to get away so badly. He would give a month's pay—well, no, not quite so much—to be back again. But then—there were only painful memories. The shop with a new name painted over the door, that quiet cemetery, the old people who had known his mother. My mother, he thought, and then the incidents of the previous night fell sharply into place. He had been certain it was her voice ; those hours, straining into the darkness, the words repeated over and over in a low whisper lest anyone sleeping

badly might hear. And then the growing certainty, the sudden exhilaration when the voice, so faint that only he could hear, seemed to hover intangible in the air. When it ceased he had shivered as though it were some form of witchcraft, and not a science that had been taught him in Paris by a man who had changed more francs than he cared to remember.

All at once, Zeller sat up. He must be dreaming: to be lolling here in sight of the sentries. He recalled the Arab with renewed curiosity. Audincourt was like a chain with his Arab Bureau. A constant stream of information paid for in gold and fitted by Audincourt's bony fingers into one fragment of a jigsaw puzzle; just one single segment of the spider's web that stretched across the country.

Ah well, he thought, getting to his feet and dusting his tunic. He examined a spot on his sleeve where the material was growing thin, and sighed. Patching—it was part of one's life here; patching uniform, patching boots, sewing worn-out harness which had rotted through the constant sweating of the mules. We're an army of scarecrows, he thought ruefully. His Majesty's picked regiment of bird scarers. He began to walk slowly up the hot steps, cautiously eyeing the door behind which the Colonel must be sleeping.

But Boucard was wide awake, and came hurrying out to join him. He was wearing the antelope-skin cap with which the Zouaves had presented him, and it gave him the appearance of a ferocious pirate. He returned Zeller's salute absent-mindedly.

"Another day gone, Colonel." Zeller jabbed a finger towards the fiery sky, but neither looked up. They could judge the position of the sun exactly.

"Ha," Boucard said. "Anything to report?"

"No, Colonel. Tomorrow we relieve El Oud. I've told Delange to——"

"Now wait a moment." Boucard was troubled whether to tell the Commandant. "Who's in command up there?" he asked. "Brosset, isn't it?"

Zeller nodded.

"Then keep him there. He knows something about the Duzair and has a head on his shoulders."

"You're not expecting trouble, Colonel?" Zeller's bird-like head seemed to bob with excitement in the heat.

"Trouble," Boucard said, staring at the mountains, "have you ever known a time when we weren't sitting on a volcano?" He was looking at the distant brown ridges. For ten kilometres outside the fort, the ground was flat; broken rock, shrubs half drowned in dust. A parched landscape until the foothills rose up leading to the valleys and the towering mountains, rising like steps cut backward into the sky.

"It's a cruel country." Zeller found it easy to read his thoughts.

"Listen," Boucard said. "Sometimes it's as though you can hear the mountains breathing. Sometimes I think of all those miles of sand beyond them. You've been up there, haven't you? Nothing but sand and a few palm trees stretching out to eternity. And when the wind blows—how it piles up; crushing against the mountains until one day they'll move under the weight and millions of tons of sand will come flooding down into the sea."

"Ah no, Colonel." Zeller looked at him sideways. He's in one of his moods, he thought.

"It's only a dream," Boucard said, "a favourite dream. I'd like to know those mountains conquered. We've ridden through them, razzia after razzia, and they've sucked us dry. It's like a lemon squeezer," he cried, "this damned country. And yet it belongs to Europe."

"Belongs to Europe?" Zeller was uncertain about history. But this wilderness with its unending mountains—it wasn't possible!

"To Europe," Boucard repeated. "Who built those temples and water cisterns but Romans and Byzantines. I tell you Zeller, this country is just an outpost of Europe. It belongs to us by thousands of years of history. We only lost it through laziness and petty squabbling and weak-gutted kings who let their armies rot.

"You never did like royalty, did you, Colonel?"

"Kings!" Boucard's big hands tightened on the stone parapet. "Don't be a fool, Zeller."

But you know my feelings, Colonel. I'm a Republican just like yourself."

"That's enough," Boucard said. "I'll have no politics in this fort. Politics! Talk to the mountains if you must, but not to me. Ask them what let the Arabs in to devastate this country. Yes, and sail their boats across to Spain. You don't know Spain, do you, Zeller? I was there for years. You get a foretaste there; the fanaticism to serve a cause that's lost and forgotten everywhere but in your own heart. And then you come to Africa and find it magnified; as though a burning-glass were playing on the mountains."

"A burning-glass?" Zeller's mind was simple and direct. Perhaps it's the heat, he thought. He glanced quickly at Boucard, but his eyes were staring towards the mountains, and only the long scar running from cheek to mouth twitched as though Boucard's feelings were smouldering beneath.

"Yes, a burning-glass." Boucard's voice was gruff. "How long have you been out here, Zeller?"

"Five years."

"And what did they tell you when you landed?"

"That it was all over except for a little fighting in the mountains."

"You believed that?"

"Yes." Zeller smiled ruefully. "Yes, I believed it at first."

"Exactly." Boucard turned away from the mountains and looked at Zeller. "And how many men have you lost since then?"

"God knows." Zeller was thinking of his original company; the tanned faces, the uniforms that even then had seemed practically worn out. He remembered the eternal drafts during the years that followed; the men fresh from France, bewildered by the fierce sunlight and the gay crashing of the brass band that had welcomed them to Africa.

"Ah, Zeller," Boucard said, "you see what I mean."

"I see what you mean," Zeller said quietly. He remembered now that at the Cadet School his instructors had talked of national pride. At that time it had seemed natural to agree wholeheartedly that because the Emperor had been

driven out of Egypt years ago, it was only just that one day France should return to Africa. And return they had. He could recall the very newspaper with a thrill of pride. Algiers bombarded. French troops capture the fort. At that time it had seemed the campaign was already over. How could he have imagined himself isolated in this fort fifteen years later. "Eighteen-thirty," Boucard said unexpectedly. "I was at the landing. It was child's play until the Leopard——" He chewed fiercely at his lip.

"The Leopard," Zeller repeated. "Why, Colonel, sometimes I think it's like fighting a shadow."

"A shadow, eh?" Boucard said savagely. "Year after year we've beaten him, smashed his army, chased him through the mountains. You'd think he'd grow tired. But a man like that is beyond his body. He's a flame, Zeller, a fanatic who fights on whilst there's still a spark of hope."

"You know, Colonel. I think you admire him."

"Admire him! I've been chasing him for years, and always he's eluded me. Slipped away across the frontier, or hidden himself in a cave right under our noses. Do you know, Zeller, I saw him once. We were chasing him through a valley. I could see him plainly; a small, well-built man on an Arab horse. I pulled my mare up and took a shot at him—useless at that range, but I wanted him for myself. The ball must have gone very close. He noticed it and half-turned my way. And then, courteously, very courteously, he lifted his hand as though in salute. For a moment I had an impression that he regretted I'd missed him. But then he was off down a ravine, and we couldn't lay hands on him. I wondered—how often has that happened to you, and yet you won't give up? And then I imagined myself in his place. Would I go on in face of an impossibility? That's what we are, Zeller, in the long run; an impossibility. We've too many cannon, too much gunpowder, too many peasants to put in blue uniforms and send overseas. And he knows it—and goes on fighting. That's when I began to admire him."

"But, Colonel——" Zeller was disturbed. Boucard had spoken with passion and his face, caught in the setting sun, appeared flushed and purpling.

“Well?” Boucard’s eyes stared at him fiercely.

“How can you admire a man who butchers the wounded; who lets his tribesmen cut their heads off and stack them up like cannon balls. And the prisoners. You know what that means!”

“War isn’t child’s play. A cannon ball does its work in just as ugly a way as a knife. Oh, stop looking at me like that, Zeller.”

“Like what, Colonel?”

“Like a sheep, man. You think I see the Leopard as a noble savage. But you know very well what I feel about capturing him. I’d die happy if I could accomplish that. Even if no-one in Oran found time to thank me.”

“You feel that badly, don’t you, Colonel? If only there were——”

“Oh, be quiet, Zeller. You know very well what I feel. But it’s no more pleasant for you than it is for me, in this tin-pot place—with those mountains——” Boucard shook his fist impotently at the ranges where sombre colours were beginning to seep across the crests. Sinking towards the sea, the sun seemed to assault the mountains, striking with dying, but powerful, rays at the jagged peaks which were now blue or purple in a confusion of changing colour. So silent and brooding, that Boucard resented their assurance of eternity. Give me another year, he thought. Another twelve months. But the mountains were silent, and he felt his own insignificance.

“We don’t mind it here, Colonel. Not with you here. That was what I was trying to say when you, when you——” Zeller made a pathetic gesture with his hand.

“You don’t, eh?”

“The me: trust you, Colonel. We all do. You know I don’t say that lightly.”

“No,” Boucard said, touched. “No, of course.”

“If only there was a chance of action. Even a razzia, a raid into the mountains.”

“You may not have to wait very long.” Boucard was staring at the mountains again.

“But why?” Zeller shrugged his shoulders. “It’s so quiet, with the Leopard safe across the frontier. . . .”

"Ah, yes." Boucard grunted. He had decided now : let the news rest safe.

"There wasn't any news today? That Arab——" Zeller glanced curiously at his face.

"No. Just routine."

"I see," Zeller said regretfully. "Well, Colonel, I'll be off." He had raised his hand to salute when Boucard stopped him.

"Look there," he said softly. "What do you make of that?" Almost as he spoke, they heard a sentry calling, his voice cracked and hoarse, croaking across the fort.

"Not bad," Boucard said complacently, "even for an old man's eyes." He nodded and chuckled, listening for the recognition.

"It must be the new Chasseur Captain," Zeller said, straining his eyes.

"Very probably. I wonder what he'll think of this picturesque spot, after the Household Cavalry?"

"The what?" Zeller stared at him in amazement.

"H'mm. Exchanged into the Chasseurs; personal reasons. Wife died soon after their marriage. I had a note from de la Motte."

"Well——" Zeller made no effort to conceal his surprise.

Boucard nodded. He was wondering whether de la Motte had purposely sent Captain d'Auberon to Sagun. But perhaps I'm wrong, he thought, hearing the trumpet, coughing out the recognition. Perhaps I'm wrong. He listened with satisfaction as the notes died harsh and clear across the sand.

Almost immediately a trumpet answered from the track beside the sea. Boucard could see them plainly; an officer, a sergeant—and four troopers. In the vivid sunset they seemed to ride through bands of colour from which a bit or a sword-hilt caught the sun and glistened faintly.

CHAPTER 3

CAPTAIN D'AUBERON let his horse pick its way across the sand, too depressed and flattened by the sight of those muddy brown walls and the dejected tricolour to care whether anyone might be watching his arrival.

"You mean to say"—he bent closer to the Sergeant—"that you live in that place?"

"Yes, Captain." The man's face was not without an expression of smug satisfaction.

"But how do you keep from going mad?" The fort was like a tiny box; four square walls with a couple of turrets. A gate which looked as though a mighty hand had punched a hole in the stonework, and a telegraph whose arms poked out like a windmill near one of the turrets. All down the coast he had been seeing similar forts. But somehow—he had never imagined he would have to live in one.

"Oh, you get used to it, Captain. 'Course, if you're fresh from France, you'll miss the greenness. That's what I dream about—a big marronnier in full bloom; great pink and white candles of flower amidst all those luscious green leaves. Sometimes, I'm lying underneath the branches with a bottle and my chessboard close at hand. There's a stream a few yards away—with the water going chunk, chunk, chunk, over big white pebbles. Ah!" he sighed, "but what am I talking about, sir? That's no way to welcome you to Sagun."

"But you don't mind it out here, Sergeant?" D'Auberon looked searchingly at the leathery face. Oursel couldn't be more than thirty, but his smooth shaven cheeks were lined and seamed with little gullies. Creases ran down from either side of his nose to join the corners of his lips. His forehead was creased too, and his eyebrows thick and bushy. Only his eyes seemed unaffected by this chiselling process. Blue and lively, they stared from under hooded lids. Oursel rode with an easy, upright sureness; his well-muscled body fitting snugly into the worn uniform. From time to time, he raised

a hand to adjust his faded red cap and look back at the troopers behind. His glances at the Captain were full of curiosity; cautious, yet disposed to be friendly.

"Oh yes, sir. You get used to serving here. Our squadron has been at Sagun over eight months. And before that we were at another fort farther down the coast."

"But I thought the Chasseurs were with the flying columns all the time. Not this garrison work——" D'Auberon gestured towards the horse lines outside the fort.

"You might say it was all action. You see the fort, sir?" Oursel pointed to Sagun, which glowed a dusty yellow in the fading light. "That's just a pawn; an outpost on the board. It may seem dull, until you realise whom you're playing against. Now turn the board round, sir. Look at your opponent. You see those mountains?"

"Yes." D'Auberon had been aware of them all day. Like brooding animals, sullen and dulled behind a shimmering heat that hid their long, seamed gullies and the glistening rock faces.

"They look quiet now; half asleep. But venture up there alone and you won't come back. Each valley has its tribe. When you get closer, you can see their villages; dirty clusters of huts perched up on the tops of precipices. That's where they live, the Arabs, like birds of prey. Savage birds, sir, with wonderful eyes that pick out a column before it leaves a fort. Down here on the plain it's like a little harbour where your ship is safe from the storm. But put one foot beyond those slopes and it's a different matter. You're in a primitive land; a world where you've got to kill or be killed. There's no humanity, no rules of war. Only a struggle that never lets up, and which you can't win without guns and more guns because you're fighting a nation that won't recognise defeat."

"But I thought—they told me the country was practically pacified." D'Auberon felt a strange stirring.

"They'll tell you that in France, Captain. But France is one world and Africa's another. Don't think me impertinent, sir, but I know what soldiering in France is like. Here, it's different. There's a real brotherhood right through the

Army. It's the danger and the——" His arm gestured at the mountains. "And the cleanness. Not the fighting, but the—— Oh, I can't explain it, Captain. I haven't got the words."

"I see," d'Auberon said slowly. At first the Sergeant's free manner of talking had nettled him. He was not used to chatting to non-commissioned officers who treated you as equals. Instinctively he resented it, but somehow Oursel was so natural. He had noticed a similar tendency all the way down the coast. By comparison with his own regiment, this was a ragamuffin army; dusty, hard-bitten, but sure of itself. Yet—when it came to the real thing—— Well, we'll see he thought; warm still, with a childish assurance that in the long run it was drill and turnout that counted.

"There! They've seen us, sir." Oursel pointed to the fort and d'Auberon heard the sound of the trumpet. Somehow the harsh notes touched some chord, softening his first impression. So that when Oudry, the trumpeter, raised the brass mouthpiece to his lips and sent an answering call hammering brassily towards the fort, d'Auberon found his depression had vanished.

They rode past the horse lines with their rows of tethered horses and drab brown tents. The troopers turned and stared curiously and d'Auberon could hear their voices; harsh and carrying clearly in the thin air. They'll be discussing me, he thought, and found himself wondering whether it might be difficult, measuring up to their idea of an officer.

"Mind your head, sir." Oursel's voice dragged his thoughts back. Glancing up, he saw the fort almost on top of them. A high, massive wall seemed to thrust up out of the sand. Grez boulders laid one on top of another and cemented with God knew what mixture to hold them together. At the top, heads peered down on them from some concealed parapet. Then they were beneath a stone archway. He caught a glimpse of blistered gateposts. For a few feet the tunnel continued, and then they were out in the open and Oursel was dismounting from his horse.

For a moment d'Auberon made no effort to dismount. He was staring, fascinated, at the square. He was inside

the fort now ; cut off from the desert and mountains and plunged suddenly amidst a small, compact community whose eyes he could feel peering at him with a communal curiosity. So strong was his impression that he remained sitting, a little unnerved by the rough atmosphere that reminded him of the prints in his father's house of settlers stockaded amidst the Indians.

Against each side of the walls a number of stone and wooden shacks were propped up crazily with timber. From their makeshift windows and doors, a mass of heads seemed to be staring at him. In one angle of the walls was a solid stone building, doubtless the powder magazine. In the centre of the open space was a Roman column ; high, but leaning like the tower of Pisa. To one side stood a big fig tree, and beneath its dusty leaves a whitewashed circle of stones surrounded a well where soldiers were busy with rope and buckets.

"You find it strange, sir?" Oursel had come round to stand beside him. "When I first came here," he said, "I thought I'd never get used to it. Three hundred men living on top of each other. Ugh!" He shrugged his shoulders. "But after a few days you don't notice it."

"Where do the officers live?"

"In that long shack over there, sir." Oursel indicated a rambling wooden shed. "But most of our Chasseur gentlemen prefer the horse lines outside. It's cleaner, too."

"Cleaner," d'Auberon repeated, lowering himself gingerly from the saddle. It had suddenly occurred to him that he might have forgotten Hélène without coming to this uncouth country. He sniffed, and the sudden scent of woodsmoke filled him with a poignant nostalgia. He felt lost ; terribly alone in a world he did not understand.

"I'll fetch Captain Piatte," Oursel said. "No doubt you'd like something to eat after the journey, and the cooks are just starting soupe."

"Captain Piatte?" d'Auberon said. All around, the dusk seemed to be creeping in with amazing rapidity. Little fires twinkled red in each corner of the fort. When he looked up, it was to find the sky above him filled with stars.

"The squadron commander, sir. Ah, there he is." Oursel hurried forward towards a figure standing in the doorway of the big hut. D'Auberon watched him salute and point in the direction where he was standing. How alone I am, he thought, experiencing a sudden wave of self-pity. In a decent regiment, he would never be kept waiting. His handsome face became sulky and petulant as he watched the two men walking leisurely towards him.

"Welcome, Captain." It was a curiously gentle voice. Looking up, d'Auberon saw two melancholy eyes in a sun-burnt face. My God, how sad he is, he thought. But the hand that grasped his was vibrant and warm.

"You are Captain Piatte?" He could not stop looking at the man's face; the broad forehead, the nose, delicate and chiselled; the mouth, set firm with a neat, clean-shaven upper lip.

"But yes, my dear Captain d'Auberon. And it falls on me to welcome you to this fort. As you see, it's not remarkable for its luxury. But it does—it does," he repeated, looking curiously at d'Auberon. "But—you must be tired. Oursel, get over to the horse lines and send Lavin here. He'll be the Captain's servant. Now come with me. You must find all this very strange."

"It's, it's picturesque." D'Auberon warmed gradually as Piatte took him by the arm and guided him past a row of huts. In the distance, he heard the clatter of hooves as Oursel and the escort rode out beneath the arch.

"Picturesque! Ah well, it's a matter of taste. Perhaps it's best to cling to that illusion as long as you can. Because the reality——" He paused, about to say something, but shut his mouth suddenly and smiled. "But you'll have time enough to find out." He pushed open a door made of skins nailed on to rough strips of wood. "Come in, Captain," he said, holding the door back with one hand whilst he waved d'Auberon inside. "Now—make yourself at home." He pointed to a long table hacked from rough wood round which a collection of upturned biscuit boxes huddled in ungainly confusion.

"This is the—the mess?" D'Auberon stared at the dusty

room with ill-concealed dismay. There was a sour, dry smell that seemed to cling to the wooden walls, and in the dim light the small space appeared crammed with a jumbled mass of shadows that sorted themselves gradually into boxes, tin trunks and hammocks, rolled and stacked against the walls.

"Our mess." Piatte appeared to be smiling, and d'Auberon felt a sudden annoyance.

"And who lives here?" he asked, trying to suppress the anger in his voice.

"Why, all of us. Chasseurs, Zouaves, the fellows from the Line Regiment. We are a mixture, you see, a squadron here, a company there. But we get on well enough. Of course, you needn't sleep here if you don't choose."

"They sleep here, too?"

"In those hammocks. We're cramped for space. I'm fortunate. I've a little cell up on the battlements and de Courcy, that's our other colleague in the Chasseurs, has a tent in the horse lines. But don't look so horrified, my dear d'Auberon. If it's not to your taste, we can arrange something. Here, Bourdet." He thumped loudly on the wall, and from somewhere outside there came a hurried rustling of someone surprised. "Bourdet, bring in a bottle of cognac. And my glasses, man." He turned and politely pulled out a box for d'Auberon to sit on.

"Take it easy, Captain," he said softly. "No doubt you've been used to another world, and I don't blame you feeling as you do."

"As I do?" D'Auberon looked at him suspiciously. He's playing some game with me, he thought, feeling miserable. He watched Piatte working expertly with a tinder box, and turned his face away as the candle, stuck in a bottle, spluttered reluctantly into life.

"Listen, monsieur." Piatte's face seemed to have changed in the warm light. There was no superciliousness, only two kindly eyes that stared sadly at his companion. "I know very well how you are feeling. Didn't I experience it myself when I first arrived?"

"But I wanted to come here."

"You did! And would it be insufferably rude to ask why?"

"Personal reasons." D'Auberon was half tempted to tell him. He looked so understanding, swinging his legs to and fro and staring with those eyes which had an almost hypnotic effect.

"I see." D'Auberon was glad that Piatte did not question him further. "Well, let's drink to your success," he said as an orderly came in, carrying a tray with a bottle and two thick glasses. "Put it down, Bourdet." He poured two measures of cognac and handed one to d'Auberon.

"Not too fast," he said, touching his glass. "You'll understand when you've tasted this especial brand of firewater."

D'Auberon felt the cognac burning his throat and leaping downward with a peculiar sensation as of fire. He coughed convulsively and found the tears standing in his eyes. "What's this?" he asked weakly, anxious lest Piatte should be playing some joke.

"Cognac," Piatte said shortly. "Sometimes we get a bottle from France. But ordinarily it's this Algerian brand. Once your stomach will stand it, you can call yourself a veteran—so they say." He was smiling again.

"Captain"—d'Auberon had to nerve himself to ask the question—"is it, is it a harsh life out here?"

"That depends where you have served before. What was your regiment?"

"The Household Cavalry."

"So!" Piatte whistled gently. "In that case you will find a difference, a definite difference."

"It's not that I mind that." The eyes seemed to compel d'Auberon to speak frankly. "Really, I assure you, it's what I want. I came here—well—to suffer, to harden myself."

"To forget, eh?"

"To forget, if you like. And I don't ask favours. I'm prepared for life just as I find it. But I want to know what to expect. Every moment since I've been in Africa, I've felt, well, what in boys' stories they'd call a tenderfoot. Perhaps it's my face. I never was very skilful at hiding my feelings. But everyone I talk to—that Sergeant, for instance—seems to

be looking at me as though I were a boy. It's as though they were grinning and saying to themselves—he's got to go through it ; as though they get pleasure from the idea." He stopped and sat looking at Piatte, his boyish face flushed and appealing.

"Have another cognac," Piatte said quietly. The young man's face had touched him strangely, so that he felt very old. He knew exactly what he ought to say, but could not bring himself to speak. So he tilted the bottle in silence, listening to the faint gurgle and gazing at the candle flame.

"Ah, Captain. That's enough!" D'Auberon's voice startled him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was just thinking what to say. I like you, d'Auberon. I'm glad you're here. But I wonder if you'll understand."

"Please go on." D'Auberon had no desire to drink the fiery brandy, but forced himself to take a sip. He sat, staring at Piatte, who remained quite silent, as though the two of them were bound together in a silent comradeship.

"Very well," Piatte said. "If you were a normal soldier, posted here through circumstances you couldn't control, I wouldn't trouble to say this. I'd palm you off with a joke or two and leave your own courage to do the rest. But it's not quite like that—is it?"

"Why do you ask me that?" D'Auberon had lost his sense of annoyance. He could feel the sadness welling up in this strange companion.

"You'll see soon. This country is a testing ground ; a cadet school, a purgatory—whatever you like to call it. It sucks the marrow out of your bores and pulls philosophies to shreds. And it's not just the rain or the cold, or the flies and the heat that bakes your brain into little clay pellets. It's the people we fight against. Oh, I've no doubt you've heard about the Arabs and their methods. But it's their mental attitude that exhausts one. So very simple, so primitive : kill or be killed, because theirs is a hatred that never dies. Sometimes you find your nerves twanging like taut strings.

"And whether you can support it depends on what's inside you. Anyone can live in dirt and misery for a time, so long

as they know there's an end in sight. Most officers have a private end in view—even if it's only another star and a small rise in pay. That's enough, it fulfills something, gives them a sense of purpose. And as you go higher, so your comforts increase and your responsibilities too—so that you can always feel you are doing something worth while.

"No, don't look so startled, my friend. I'm telling you this because you will soon be asking yourself—why did I come here? Was it because I wanted to forget? You never can, you know. Or was it because I wanted to soldier? In other words, to kill Arabs. That's what soldiering means out here; killing Arabs under the most unpleasant conditions. You've got to want to kill very much—like the Colonel upstairs—to keep campaigning through the mountains year after year. You get old and hard and frighteningly cynical. Of course, the wisest advice is never ask yourself such questions. But in a fort like this, miles from civilisation and thrown on your own resources, even the most unimaginative man finds himself wondering. That's why people grow so strange. For the first time in their lives, they are forced to think: and the machinery is rusty, you can hear it creaking as it goes round. Do you care for poetry, by the way?"

"Yes." D'Auberon was taken aback.

"You wait. Not in two years' time."

"Why not?"

"Because something may have died inside you."

"But that's the very reason why I came."

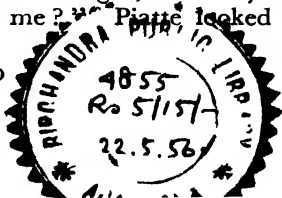
"Oh." Piatte looked at him again, almost tenderly, as though hating himself for the outpouring of advice.

"My wife, you see. We were married two weeks. Our honeymoon—in Spain. And then—the water must have been poisoned——" D'Auberon's voice died away, and he sat staring at the candle.

"Mon cher," Piatte said slowly, "and I have been telling you all this. I thought it might be some affair."

"I'm glad you did." D'Auberon found himself on his feet. How strange this all is, he thought, curiously happy.

"You don't hold it against me?" Piatte looked up at him, smiling uncertainly.



"No—you were right. I see what you are trying to tell me. That one can't exist here without some purpose. But—what purpose had I left in France?"

"D'Auberon," Piatte said.

"Yes?"

"You knew people in the Ministry, in the War Office?"

"My uncle, yes."

"Then go away from here. It's so simple. Just a conversation; a piece of note paper with an official stamp. And then the boat back from Oran. Think of it, man. France. Doesn't it tempt you?"

"No."

"But I'm serious. There's no honour in this business. That's a story for boys."

"I can't," d'Auberon said quietly. "I made up my mind to come here, and I mean to stay." He stood there, young and confident, half smiling in the candlelight like a boy, and Piatte knew it was useless to go on. Something choked in his throat. Aware of his own inadequacy, he said:

"You know your own mind. But if you should have second thoughts, just tell me. I'd like to think I was here to help you. Meantime, let's drink to your future here."

"What, more!" D'Auberon smiled at his glass, still half full.

"You're determined to become a veteran. So the sooner the better." Piatte drained his glass and put it down on the table.

"You'd better see the Colonel," he said. "Once you've made his acquaintance, you'll know what to expect."

CHAPTER 4

“**Y**OU’VE seen action before ? ” Boucard’s heavy face was stern. A common old veteran, d’Auberon thought. A coarse-grained creature without a vestige of manners. He braced himself to meet the heavy eyes, noting the purple scar that disfigured one cheek.

“ No, Colonel,” he said.

“ Guards of honour, riding behind coaches, all that sort of thing,” Boucard grunted. But although he disliked anything that smacked of pomp and pretension, he was disposed to like the young man. His face was honest, open and unmarked. He held himself well and, despite his air of distinction, was simple and manly.

“ You won’t disappoint me, Captain,” he said. “ I don’t allow my officers to disappoint me.”

“ Yes, Colonel.” D’Auberon was comparing him with his own colonel ; a tall, elegant man who lisped and was not given to concerning himself with military matters beyond the polishing of breastplates and the condition of a horse’s coat.

“ You’ll find it strange for the first months. But if you’re man enough ”—Boucard stared him in the eye—“ no doubt you’ll settle down. There are no parades here—except on business. And I’m not fussy about turnout. You’ll find your men know their business—they’ve been at it years. So learn all you can from them. And don’t be afraid to ask. Soldiers out here give information gladly.”

“ Yes, Colonel.”

“ Then sit down, and take a glass. You drink, eh ? ”

“ But yes, Colonel.” D’Auberon eyed the black bottle apprehensively. And all within half-an-hour, he thought, remembering Piatte and the fiery cognac.

“ Sit down, man.” Boucard poured a stream of brandy into a leather cup. “ I’m glad to see you, and I hope you’ll stay with us,” he said briefly, pushing the cup across and lifting his own to his lips. He took a sip, belched slightly and,

with one swift motion, finished the brandy. "What do they say at home?" he asked.

"You mean—about Africa?" D'Auberon was nervous. In the tiny room where the candle threw great shadows on the wall, the Colonel appeared, distorted; like an old bristly boar of immense proportions. There was some elemental quality about him; massive, almost primeval, which portended immense physical strength. Despite his coarseness, d'Auberon was drawn towards him. He's like an old peasant, he thought; a gigantic old peasant with all the inexhaustible qualities of France.

"Yes, yes. About the campaign out here. Worrying about money again, no doubt. They grudge us every sou and expect us to fight a war without men or supplies. By God, they'd see our point of view quickly enough if we could draft a hundred of them over here. Politicians!" He almost spat the word. "Scum. Well, what do they say?" He shot the word at the young man, confident of the impression he was making.

"I really don't know, Colonel."

"What! You're about the Court and you don't know. Surely you meet influential people; ministers, financiers, all that sort of crowd?"

"No, Colonel. I know very few. As a matter of fact——"

"Well, what?" The eyes that stared at d'Auberon were not unkindly.

"To tell you the truth, I hardly ever see a newspaper. And as for politicians—I've few acquaintances. My father, you see——"

"Blue blood, eh?" Boucard's eyes had an amused expression.

"If you like. But I was going to tell you that, after the Restoration, my father was a disappointed man. He was in England all through the——" D'Auberon felt he was on dangerous ground.

"All through the Emperor's time," Boucard said swiftly.

"Yes, Colonel. He came back with the King, but somehow things seemed to go wrong. He's a hot-tempered man, and the years in England had changed him. I think he

expected great things, but they never materialised. So now he lives in the country—very much alone. And I, I was fortunate to join my regiment through the help of an uncle.”

“Influence, eh?”

“You could call it that. But does that sort of help prevent a man from becoming a good soldier?” D’Auberon was angry, staring hard at Boucard.

“Go on, go on, I admire that spirit.” Boucard’s annoyance had begun to fade. After all, things had changed; the old ways had come back. Hadn’t he been a party to them in his own fashion; shamefully, against his own will? And wasn’t this young man about to learn the other side of the coin. Wasn’t he coming into a world where well-bred young men could learn to understand what hardship meant? That was the real fruit of Army life—understanding, a hard, exacting existence, where men were valued at their own worth. Contentedly, he poured himself another drink.

“There’s nothing much to say, Colonel. I gather you know the circumstances.” Despite his annoyance, he could not help smiling. It was like standing in the lion’s den.

“Then let me give you some advice.” Boucard put down the cup and got slowly to his feet. He found himself wishing that when he had been that age, there had been someone with experience ready to talk to him.

“Come outside,” he said quietly, leading the way out on to the parapet. He walked ahead, a bulky figure, filling the narrow space. “Now, look out there.” He turned and rested his hands on the stone, staring towards the invisible mountains.

“Yes, Colonel.”

“In a few minutes, the moon will be up. There’ll be a breeze and you’ll get the scent of Africa; something you learn to love and can never do without.” Boucard seemed to be talking to himself, and d’Auberon was conscious that this was no ordinary occasion. It was as though the Colonel’s spirit had gone outside his body, eerie and impressive in the dim light which hardly illuminated the heavy face.

“Africa,” Boucard said quietly. “I shall die here.” He was silent, gazing towards a bar of whitish light coming up

behind the mountain. He sighed heavily. Out there, in the darkness, the Leopard must be gathering an army. His campfires would be burning in some valley. He imagined the skin tents, the tethered horses, the white figures seated about the fires. It was like something being born; an idea, a faith. He sniffed deeply. The air was still, warm. Suddenly he remembered the young man beside him and felt an unfamiliar emotion; battling against the longing, the unspoken sorrow that he had no son.

"Captain," he said, sensing the gulf between them that could never be bridged, but might be softened.

"Yes, Colonel?"

"It's a hard career you've chosen. But that's a measure of your nature. Steel yourself, make yourself hard. You'll see unpleasant sights, brutal things. We are on an island here—an island in a sea of hate. You know what they'll tell you—those men who are our enemies?"

"What, Colonel?" D'Auberon was staring at him in fascination. The slow, heavy voice, the mysterious darkness seemed to create a private world in which they were utterly alone.

"They'll tell you this." Boucard jabbed a finger into the darkness. "That though our army is in Africa, we hold no part of it. That the only soil that we have conquered is there—within range of the guns in our forts."

"But, Colonel—that's ridiculous."

"Oh no, Captain. Not ridiculous. In fifty years' time perhaps, but not now."

"But I rode down here from Oran. One fort after another. And in the interior there are forts too."

"Islands," Boucard said. "Islands like settlers stockaded along an Indian frontier. And it only needs a flame, a tiny flame and a favourable wind, for the whole country to go up in fire. I've seen it happen; again and again."

"But, what is the answer?"

"Roads," Boucard said. "One day, long after we are dead, it'll be a fruitful land. There will be colonists, thousands of them, instead of the pitiful handful there are today. There'll be olive and fig groves all along the coast. And

crops, wheat and oats—imagine it. Men will farm without their guns. There'll be French cities, schools, churches. Ha !” He laughed in his throat. “But not just yet. Not until we've bled the tribes, burnt their villages, taken their herds, marched through their valleys. It's a process of attrition,” he said. “And the tribes know it. Now, do you understand why they fight ?”

“But, Colonel. They are only savages, so what does it matter ?”

“Ah, God.” Boucard stared at him almost with loathing.

“I may not know this country. But we have a mission here—to civilise the people. As you say—it's hard, but it's only a matter of time.”

“No doubt,” Boucard said wearily. He felt suddenly as though the old, primitive values had lost their meaning. I'm getting old, he thought sadly. So old that I'm disturbed about what this boy thinks in his ignorance.

“Forgive me, Colonel. You must think me impertinent.” D'Auberon had sensed the savage undercurrent.

“There's nothing to forgive,” Boucard said. “You are as you are. Only experience will change that, and you'll have plenty of it.”

“Yes, Colonel.” D'Auberon eyed him doubtfully.

The moon was rising and in the cold, clear light he could see the Colonel's face, set as though carved in wood. He must be a little mad, he thought, disturbed, yet knowing that it could not really matter. All this talk of the Arabs, this stream of sentiment from a hard-bitten old man who wouldn't think twice about burning a village. It was odd, faintly un-nerving. But he refused to think about it. Tomorrow, when it was light, everything would seem different.

“That's all,” Boucard said shortly, glad now to be rid of d'Auberon. “You can go on patrol tomorrow. Piatte is riding up to El Oud to relieve the garrison. Go with him. Get the feel of the country.”

CHAPTER 5

AUDINCOURT and Lebel came through the gateway just in time to see the Zouaves moving off. A compact mass of overburdened figures, like muscular carriers, loaded with heavy packs, tins, blankets and muskets. Near the head of the column rode Piatte, and behind him d'Auberon with four Chasseurs. Out in front, the scouts were already a long way off, their horses sending up little clouds of sand that hung gently in the air. Although it was early, the sun beat down with crushing force, sucking up the traces of coolness, and giving promise of a brazen, scorching day.

"Will the Caid be up?" Lebel's features were like an overgrown boy's. His face was still pink and his eyes, trusting and childish, were bedded into wide sockets, tufted with the faintest trace of whitish eyebrows. Only the harelip dispelled the illusion; ugly and uncouth, it twisted up the rosebud mouth, giving him a snarling, desperate expression.

Audincourt removed his pince-nez and wiped them on his sleeve. "They never go to bed," he said. "I'll lay you five francs that he has seen us leaving and told his servant to spread out the cushions. He put his glasses carefully back on his nose.

"What are you going to ask him?" Lebel was staring after the column. I might be up there, he thought; plodding along through the sand with my pack straps cutting into my shoulders. It was typical that Boucard forced officers to carry packs.

"For information," Audincourt said cautiously. He was not sure that he liked Lebel, the man could hardly speak Arabic. And besides, it was Zeller who had forced him to take him. "An assistant for your Arab bureau," he had said with that wooden expression that didn't tell you a word. But Audincourt didn't want any assistance. Not with the news he was sharing with the Colonel. He kept that privately in his round, capable head. He enjoyed secrets. They gave him a special sense of power. So what was Lebel doing here?

One word before the right time, and the whole fort would go up in fire.

"Come on," he said gruffly. "Listen to me, and keep your mouth shut."

"Oh, very well." Lebel's voice was resentful. He's just like everybody else, he thought; despises me. But it's better here all the same; better than the desert and those mountains and the wretched little fort at El Oud. He set his teeth and hurried after his companion, his short legs making desperate efforts to keep pace with Audincourt's lanky stride.

As they passed the horse lines, the village came into view; a huddled mass of dilapidated white buildings. At first sight, it seemed that the houses had suffered an artillery bombardment, but, on drawing nearer, it could be seen that this illusion was only due to their permanent state of decay. A few palm trees clung to one end of the village, like an attached oasis. Not far off was an olive grove and a few patches of fig and walnut trees whose branches curled downward towards the ground, as though weary of supporting the intense heat.

"Have you ever thought how self-contained we are here?" Audincourt was fond of springing questions. He knew that Lebel had never considered the matter, and was pleased at his blank look of astonishment.

"It's true," he said, in the manner of a lecturer. Sometimes he liked to ape his father, who was a professor of Latin. "The law of necessity," he went on. "Who else would plant a garden in the wilderness?"

"Anyone," Lebel said crossly, beginning to sweat.

"Not at all. Only the Army of Africa. Why—look over there." Audincourt pointed proudly at the white wall which surrounded some acres of land not far from the village. Over the top, they could see the branches of trees; figs, oranges and dates in neat rows. A little wooden gate, set into the stonework, gave access to the gardens.

"It's only a garden. What of it?"

"It's like the limejuice in a ship far out at sea." Audincourt's voice was piqued.

"I don't know what you are talking about." Stupid, pompous fool, Lebel was thinking. He wondered why he

had ever accepted this post. But Zeller's face had been eloquent.

"Why, fruit, man. Soldiers can't live without vegetables and fruit. Their blood turns sour. So we build a garden, bring seed from France."

"Only cabbages grow in this soil."

"Well—cabbages are very necessary. It's the same with meat. You can't live on biscuits, so we buy beef from the Caid."

"Beef!"

"Don't turn up your nose. You can't afford to be dainty. There are chickens, too. A little scraggy I'll admit, but excellent soup. It's a fine arrangement. Except when——"

"Except when, what?" Lebel had not been listening.

"Except when there's trouble. Then supplies vanish into thin air. Two years ago now, you don't remember the difficulties we were in," he cried merrily, aware that he had roused his sulky companion.

"Why—what happened?" Lebel's voice was apprehensive.

"Not a chicken to be bought in the village. And our own supplies were raided. We had to put a guard on the garden, and one of them was knifed."

"What! So close to the fort!"

"Don't look so nervous, old fellow. The Caid had been threatened by the Duzair, you see; all manner of nasty things they were going to do to him. So he closed shop. We were living on biscuits and salt beef. No joke, I can tell you, in hot weather."

"But——" Lebel had stopped walking. He stood a few paces behind Audincourt, his mouth open. All his fears were back.

"Come on, come on." Audincourt took him by the arm.

"Do you imagine that worried us for long?"

"What did you do?" Lebel followed his companion without protest.

"Why, paid the Caid a little extra. And soon he was organising convoys, at dead of night, you understand. A stone thrown up against the walls, the gates opening; plenty

of oil on the hinges. And in came a couple of oxen or half a dozen sheep."

"You, you arranged that?"

"Who else? You see, this Caid—you'll meet him in a minute—is very like a child. Years ago he must have been a wild fellow. He had his own village, his goum to follow him on raids. And he fought us when we first came here, fought like a wildcat until we broke his spirit with gold."

"With gold?"

"Gold, my friend. It's purchased nominal friendship; nominal, mark you, in every area near our forts. But it has to be backed with force; you can't teach a wild animal tricks without a hot iron. And if the Caid plays false with us——" Audincourt sucked in his cheeks so that his face became mean and cruel. I don't like him, thought Lebel, but continued to listen.

"Of course, he has to be crafty. He's between us and the Duzair. To them, he's a renegade, a servant of the Roumi. They despise him, but use him because he watches the fort and gives them news. And in the same way, we despise him. But he gives us news too. And a very lucrative information bureau it is for him—quite apart from the supplies he sells us and the money he levies from the shopkeepers in that filthy village. The man's a serpent, a positive serpent. You watch how he treats us. Why——" Audincourt's tongue peeped forth to lick his dry lips. He seemed unable to find the appropriate words.

"Well—what do you want him to tell us?"

"You'll see," Audincourt said, purposefully vague. "But watch me carefully, Lebel. And don't open your mouth before I give you a signal."

By the time they reached the village, both men were wet with perspiration.

"Look at those flies." Lebel pointed to two freshly killed lambs dangling from the hooks in an open-fronted shop.

"Disgusting," he said indignantly, peering deeper into the shop where the butcher, wrapped in a burnous, sat motionless, staring out into the street.

"Oh, come on, come on." Audincourt had a private

horror of the narrow street, the stinking shops, the villagers ; jostling too close for his peace of mind. Some day, one of them might choose to slip a dagger in his back. He shuddered despite the heat, and hurried on, stepping out of the path of a crowd of half-naked children who came running from a shop, pursued by the grey-bearded owner.

"Those Jews"—Lebel pointed to an open shop front crammed with bowls, bottles, small carved boxes and pieces of primitive ironwork—"they sell everything," he said, half wondering.

Audincourt nodded. "Everything worth while ; spices, wool, seed, luxuries. But I don't know how they keep alive. There are two in this village, you know. And if the Caid needs money, he sends his henchmen. Usually, they need no persuasion—give in with a sickly grace. But if the price seems too stiff, then there's a real hullabuloo. I was with the Caid once when it started ; yells, screams, the thwack of sticks. 'What is that unpleasant noise ?' the Caid asked. And you know what his men told him ?"

"No," Lebel said, glad that they were coming to the end of the village where the ground sloped slightly upward towards the palm trees.

"'Nothing to disturb you,' they said. 'It is only the screams of a Jew.' And the old man nodded peacefully. But quiet, there he is," said Audincourt, hastily pulling down his tunic and slowing his walk to a dignified gait.

* * * * *

"The sweetmeats are not to your liking ?" the Caid murmured. His eyes, bedded in deep pools of sunburnt fat, were watching the French officers with an unnatural calm.

"No, they are excellent," Audincourt said quickly. "It is your failure to open your heart which causes me to be sad." It was only with an effort that he kept his annoyance from showing. The intense heat and the purposeful stupidity of the Caid had aroused his unreasoning rage.

"But what can I tell you ? Would you be happier if I made up a story ? You are an exacting man who must know what goes on in every man's mind." The Caid laid a finger

to the side of his own head and tapped gently. Watching him, Lebel felt uncertain. This big, fat man whose skin glistened as though heavily oiled, whose thick white beard clung like the tendrils of a vine to his globular cheeks, gave him a sensation of unease.

"I have asked you about the Duzair." Audincourt's voice was thick, as though his tongue was too big for his mouth. "And you have told me nothing—nothing. Yet you have news from them. I know it."

"News——" The Caid spread his hands as though laying his soul at the Frenchman's feet. "How can I have news?" His face was pathetic; injured that a Roumi officer should doubt his word.

"I have seen a horseman enter your village."

"Ah!" Too late the Caid recalled the devil glass through which this insufferable Roumi watched like a kestrel from the walls. "But many horsemen come this way." His smile was less certain; the thoughts heavy in his mind.

"Do you think I cannot recognise a Duzair?" Audincourt leant forward, staring intently at the old man. I've caught him now, he thought.

"You have keen eyes," the Caid said regretfully.

"As keen as your ears are keen. What have you heard?"

"It was nothing." Inwardly the Caid was recalling the number of soldiers in the fort. It was not difficult; the Duzair had paid him for just that mental exercise. But the Duzair had threatened, and his words were heavier than the meagre handful of coins. In the Caid's mind rested a great uncertainty. The Leopard was coming back. And the Leopard had an especial way of dealing with Caid's who were the running dogs of the French. He was not so old that he could not remember. He shuddered slightly despite the heat. But the French Colonel was also a man of iron. The unsolved question went round and round in his brain.

"It was nothing," he repeated slowly. "There is always trouble where the Duzair pitch their tents."

"Pitch their tents?" Audincourt's voice was harsh. "What causes them to pitch their tents away from their villages?" he asked.

"Some foolishness," the Caid said vaguely, "some foolishness. You know they are a wild people."

"How great a foolishness? Would it tempt them down into the plain? Would it move their hearts so that they forget the lessons we have taught them?"

"It is possible." The Caid was nervous. "It is difficult to restrain their young men," he explained.

"Bullets can teach that lesson. You have seen what we can do?"

"I have seen." The Caid's face had lost its normal calm.

"As the eagle falls upon the lamb—so shall we strike their villages," Audincourt went on harshly.

"Even so." The Caid was thinking of the green banner. Twenty years ago he would have laughed in the face of the insolent Roumi. But twenty years was like a century. His young men were dead, his tribe scattered. Now there was only gold and this pitiful village. They had chained him more securely than a prisoner. He knew it and was ashamed. His heart was fierce against the Roumi, and only his terror of the Leopard kept him from smiling in their faces. As a man grew older, he learnt wisdom; grew weary and lost his fire. He felt himself betrayed, made impotent by the accursed Roumi. And just because they had inflicted this humiliation upon him, he would not tell them. Let this officer, uglier than a camel, discover his own secrets. And how the man talked. Like a nagging woman, his voice offended the air.

"The Colonel's anger goes across the mountains like thunder," Audincourt was saying. His annoyance was dying away. I've cornered him, he thought. He watched the Caid eagerly.

"That is true," the Caid said, nodding wisely. "The fame of a warrior carries far and the Colonel is a warrior whom men fear. None the less, there is no news that I can give you."

"No news!" Audincourt sat up rigid, his face convulsed with annoyance. "Are you mad that you talk like this?" he shouted.

"I do not speak as a madman," the Caid replied gently, his eyes scanning the Captain's face with a sadness that veiled the satisfaction he was experiencing.

"You will tell me nothing? Not a word of these rumours?"

"Rumours? I have heard nothing."

"But——" Audincourt tried to choke back his anger, aware that the Caid was watching as an old ape will survey a child from behind his bars. "Very well," he said shortly. He would have liked to seize the old man by the beard and dash his head against the walnut tree.

"Should there be news from the mountains, you may depend on my loyalty." The Caid was savouring that peculiar power experienced only by recalcitrant prisoners in the face of angry warders. He felt suddenly young again; like a parched plant welcoming the rain.

"Your loyalty," Audincourt said, dangerously quiet. "Take care that it is not called in question. Think well over what news you have heard, and find it in your heart to come and tell me. Otherwise——" he was trying desperately to keep the anger from his voice—"otherwise you may find it hard to keep our confidence."

"Even so." The Caid's nod of assurance was barely distinguishable from a dismissal.

"You are going—so soon?" He looked regretfully at Audincourt, who had risen to his feet.

"I am going," Audincourt said harshly. "Come on, Lebel, we must get back to the fort."

"I shall await your next visit." The Caid inclined his head courteously.

"I shall be back," Audincourt said shortly.

"It is well. Go with God."

"With God," Audincourt repeated. He stood motionless for a moment, and then turned on his heels, hurrying away so swiftly that Lebel had to run to catch him up.

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"You see?" he said, when they were some distance from the village.

"No." Lebel looked at him with dislike. "I couldn't make head or tail of what you were talking about. What news were you trying to get out of him?"

"Something he knows very well," said Audincourt, and his tone was so bitter that Lebel looked at him with alarm.

"You mean—there's going to be some sort of trouble?"

"Trouble! You talk about trouble. What do you know about it?" Audincourt waved his arms like a gaunt school-master. "Trouble!" he cried, filled with a sudden viciousness against his companion whom he found himself hating again anxious to wound and unnerve him, as he could not frighten the Caid.

"You've never seen a rising, have you?" he asked, made reckless by his anger.

"A rising. My God, what are you talking about?"

"The green banner, man. The tribes up in arms; burning, killing, a real holy war."

"But, but——" Lebel's harelip began to quiver. He looked bewildered.

"But what? Can't you face up to it, or would you rather go back to France?" Audincourt's vicious voice hissed in his ear. "You've got to have guts, you know, got to prove yourself a soldier. And there's no getting out of it. We're all in the same boat together. We crush it or—you know what happens to prisoners."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Lebel's voice was level, but his face was very pale. So it's true, Audincourt thought. He is a coward. The Zouaves must have found that out and Zeller sent him to me. He was angry now with Zeller. That stupid peasant, buttering me up with stories.

"I can't believe it," Lebel said in an odd voice. "The commandant said we were in for a quiet spell." His mouth was twitching and, watching him, Audincourt felt sudden alarm.

"Look here," he said, stopping suddenly. "You've misunderstood me, old man. I was in a temper with that swine and—well—you know how it is—the heat and one thing and another. I mean—it was all eyewash, what I was telling you. Not a word of truth."

"You—you made it all up about—about the rising?" Lebel's expression was so comical that Audincourt almost laughed.

"Yes—right out of my head. Foolish of me, I know, but I was in such a foul temper. There—forget about it. You're as safe as if you were on garrison duty in Verdun."

"You are telling me the truth?" The colour was ebbing back into Lebel's cheeks.

"You don't believe me? Here, give me your hand." Audincourt took the limp fingers and encircled them in a bony grip. It might have been all over the fort, he thought. And then what would Boucard have had to say?

"I almost thought you meant it." Lebel's heart was still thumping rapidly. Oh Christ, he thought, if only those transfer papers would go through. He had a sudden vision of the quiet, tree-lined streets of a garrison town.

"Ah—you are on edge." Audincourt smiled. "It's this damnable climate. Plays tricks with the best of us. Come on, we'd better get back to the fort," he said, hurrying off with long strides towards the horse lines.

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"Well—that confirms it," Boucard said curtly as Audincourt stood clumsily at attention some fifteen minutes later. "The old fool. He's terrified of the Leopard; knows what they do to men like himself."

"In my opinion, sir, we can take it as definite the Leopard will be crossing the frontier very shortly. The Duzair will be the first tribe to join him. We shall have to watch them."

"Brosset's up there." Boucard was thinking of the tiny fortress at El Oud. "Right in the lion's den," he said half aloud; "right under the eyes of the villagers."

"Excuse m, sir?"

"I said, we need prisoners. Brosset will have to send a patrol."

"The relief went today."

"I know." Boucard looked up at Audincourt with annoyance. Conceited young ass, he thought.

"Shall I send a galloper up there, Colonel?"

"No, no. I've given Piatte his instructions."

"Yes, Colonel." Audincourt was disappointed. The

Colonel always thought of everything ; left you no chance of using your initiative.

"Don't excite yourself, Captain." Boucard could not resist smiling. "It's not the first time I've seen an Arab rising."

"No, Colonel, but I thought——"

"You've done well, Audincourt. You use your brain. That's more than a lot of soldiers do. We'll see it out between us, you and I. But keep it to yourself for a few days yet. You understand? Not a word about the fort."

"No, Colonel." Audincourt drew himself up. He felt suddenly proud, conscious of his own strength. The Colonel used praise sparingly. "There's just one point, sir," he said carefully.

"What?"

"Lieutenant Lebel, sir. He has no aptitude for this work."

"You'd like him relieved?" Boucard's heavy eyebrows went up.

"I would, Colonel."

"What's the matter?"

"He doesn't understand the Arabs. Doesn't want to. He's half afraid of them."

"Ah." Boucard nodded his head wisely. "But who isn't?" he shot out suddenly.

"Pardon, Colonel?" Audincourt was taken aback.

"Who doesn't fear the Arabs, man? You do, I do—so does every soldier in the fort."

"But, Colonel!" Audincourt felt mortified, as though the Colonel was exposing him.

"Ah, stop playing soldiers, Captain. A few more years and you won't be shy of exposing your feelings. You can't be brave without feeling frightened first."

"Yes, Colonel." Audincourt shifted his weight uncomfortably from one leg to another.

"Stop fidgeting, Captain. I know you're a brave man. But you want to remember your heart."

"My heart?" Audincourt stared at him perplexed.

"You need a big heart, Captain. See yours doesn't atrophy."

“ But yes, Colonel.”

“ All right.” Boucard sat up as though wearied of the game. “ I’ll see Lebel goes back to the Zouaves,” he said. “ And keep me informed if there’s the slightest breath of news.”

“ Certainly, Colonel.” Audincourt let his muscles relax. I’ve won my point, he thought.

“ And that fellow Mahomet. He ought to be back in a day or two if he’s not caught. Keep your eyes open. Send out a couple of your Arabs.”

“ Very well, Colonel.” It was extraordinary how the Colonel could behave. One moment as though the sun had softened his brain. And the next—like the tried soldier he was.

“ That’s all, Captain.”

“ Thank you, sir.” Audincourt saluted and turned on his heels. As he shut the door behind him, he recalled what the Colonel had said about his heart. But what had he meant? Whatever had he been talking about? He could not get the idea out of his head as he walked away along the parapet.

CHAPTER 6

"I DARE SAY you are looking forward to your game of chess, Lieutenant. But I'm telling you, we'll have something more important on our hands before long." Sergeant Coudin laid the telescope gently on the parapet and raised a walnut-coloured face.

"I know," Brosset said irritably, conscious of the frank blue eyes. "But I can't stand people being late. The column should have been here twenty minutes ago." He stared with annoyance at the hands of his gunmetal watch.

"Perhaps it is fast, sir." Coudin preferred the sun as his time piece. "But you can't blame them not being in a hurry to reach this place. El Oud ! What a name !" He spat feelingly onto the hard red earth.

"Did you see any movement up there ?" Brosset asked, stuffing the watch back into his pocket.

"Yes, sir." Coudin nodded and pointed upward to where a huddle of huts seemed to hang precariously on top of the mountain. Farther along the crest were other villages, tiny silhouettes of black sticks and thatch, refuges from which a hundred eyes might peer contentedly into the fort.

"More horsemen. Eh ?" Brosset stared up at the ridges which cut back into a hard blue sky. Though the mountains were silent he had an uncomfortable sensation that his very words were overheard. He shrugged his broad shoulders, but the illusion remained.

"Two messengers," Coudin said briefly. "Would you like to look, sir ? They came in five minutes ago. There is some sort of council going on up there."

"No." Brosset shook his head. "What do you think yourself ?" He looked at the bearded sergeant whose face above the thick, black hair, was like old and seasoned wood.

"Trouble, Lieutenant, what else ? The Duzair are always above themselves. It's high time we taught them a lesson."

"I don't like it," Brosset said. "If the relief weren't due today, I'd send a galloper down to Sagun."

“The Colonel must know,” Coudin said quietly, “just as those carrion crows up there must know our routine. What a place to put a fort,” he said reflectively, “begging your pardon, sir, of course.”

“You know I agree with you. It’s suicide having the well outside the fort.”

“It’s the Army, sir. You can’t question the Army.” Coudin’s eyes held the suspicion of a smile.

“Well, I do.”

“No doubt, sir.”

“You mean I’m not the only one, don’t you?”

“No, sir. I was just thinking how it must look from up there.” Coudin nodded towards the grey rock.

“Well—how does it look?”

“You’ve been up there, haven’t you, Lieutenant? Ever looked down on this fort? You know what it’s like; a little patch of red earth with low walls. A sort of shack inside and not a gun in the place. From that village, you can see the soldiers quite plainly, leaning against those walls and staring up at you; like dolls, dressed in blue uniforms. Only these dolls are marksmen with plenty of powder and shot. That’s what stops tribesmen: that and the last time those dolls climbed up into the mountains and burnt the villages. The Duzair didn’t forget that; not in a hurry. They’ve lain low quite a time now, licking their wounds, breeding new Arab babies and teaching them to hate and bear arms. Well, I’d say the time had come again. Just a little jaunt down the mountains at dead of night, just one sentry who happens to be dozing—and presto the well is in their hands and we won’t have a drop of water.”

“It’s a calculated risk,” Brosset said abstractedly. “You know the orders. We can’t move the fort without losing our field of fire. They must have known that when they built the place.”

“It was different then,” Coudin said sourly.

“Different! What do you mean by that?”

“What I say, sir. In the old days, one hint of trouble and we’d have been up into those mountains settling matters in our own way. And it worked, sir. You know yourself how

well it worked. But since these new orders came we seem to have lost our grip on the tribes. On ourselves too, if you'll forgive me, sir. After all, it's not natural to put a garrison into a place like Sagun—or here for that matter—and let it rot its guts out in the sun." He paused, fumbling in his pocket for his pipe and then remembered he was on duty.

"We can't argue about the new tactics," Brosset's voice sounded unconvincing. "You know the idea—the forts are only intended as bases whilst the flying columns cover the country. It's all been planned at the highest level."

"Ha." The Sergeant stifled a derisive grunt as the faint sound of a trumpet floated gently up the valley. "That's the recognition, sir," he said with a sudden smile. "I'll get the men ready to move." His hand came swiftly to the peak of his battered cap.

"Very well, Sergeant," Brosset said quickly, aware of the sudden gleam in Gordin's eye and experiencing the exultation of a schoolboy on his last day of term.

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"There he is," said Piatte, wiping his forehead. "See? He's coming through the gate. We'll leave the horses here where there's a little shade." He lowered himself slowly out of the saddle and patted Cerise's shoulder. "Good girl," he said, glancing regretfully at the damp coat.

"Is this where they get their water?" D'Auberon stared at the well, little more than a hole in the ground. Above it, two mastick trees provided a patch of shade, though their faded green branches seemed to smoke with heat. A short distance away, he could see the fort, a box of a place; dirty white walls and a wooden gate through which a blue-coated officer was hurrying to meet them.

Piatte nodded without speaking. Instinctively, he glanced upward, a long, searching look at the mountains towards which he had been staring all the long, hot ride up the valley. But they were silent in the heat; quivering gently as though baking in some vast oven. He shrugged his shoulders and looked towards the fort.

"Hallo, Piatte. Mon Dieu, but it's good to see you."

Brosset had come to meet them. He was smiling broadly and stretched out his hand ; like a lost explorer greeting a rescue party. " I thought my spell was never coming to an end." His face was so like a boy's that Piatte could not find it in him to tell him the news. Instead, he said :

" Have you met d'Auberon—our new companion in the Chasseurs. It's his first journey up here."

" Delighted." Brosset's handshake was firm and dry. " You like it here, Captain ? "

" It's early to say. But the country is impressive. Those mountains—what strength ! " D'Auberon liked Brosset immediately.

" Ah, my dear Captain. You see them first from the sea when you sight this country. And, in my opinion, that's the best view you can obtain. From the sea—but preferably on your way back to France." His laugh was infectious and d'Auberon smiled too.

" What news ? " Piatte asked quietly.

" I was just going to tell the Captain," Brosset said, " that he'd chosen a propitious time to arrive. It's bad, Piatte, there's trouble up there, plenty of trouble and its beginning to smell. I've had Duzairs prowling round the fort at night. Coudin took a pot-shot, but the devils scampered back up the mountain. I tell you, I'm glad to be finished with this spell of duty. By the way, where's Hennessy ? I thought he was due to take over."

" The Colonel's orders," Piatte said softly. " You are to remain up here for a second tour."

" Oh Christ ! " Brosset said. He glanced quickly at d'Auberon and smiled. " Don't think I'm nervous, Captain. It's my chess I'm worrying about."

" Chess ? "

" My game of chess. I've been looking forward to it for weeks. When I can't sleep at nights I've been working out the moves. Oh, this is too much," Brosset said, wringing his hands in mock despair and making a horrible grimace. He straightened suddenly and became serious. " You're leaving me Coudin ? " he asked.

" No." Piatte shook his head. " He'll come back with

us. And, what's more, the Colonel wants prisoners. He sent you, a special order."

"A patrol, eh." Brosset's expression became very grave indeed. "You leave me up here when I'm due for relief, take my best sergeant away, spoil my game of chess and then tell me to go on patrol!" He ran his hands through his thick black hair. "You mean it, Piatte? You are not joking?"

"No," Piatte said, reluctantly.

"Look here," Brosset said. "You know very well what that means, Henri. One doesn't catch prisoners with a fishing-rod up there." His face was grim.

"I know." Piatte could find nothing to say.

"It's rough, Henri. To say the least, it's a little rough. I mean—I suppose he knows what he is doing?"

"Brosset! You know——"

"Ah, Henri, don't disturb yourself. I know this business is out of your hands. But all the same it leaves a nasty taste. A nasty taste," he repeated, fingering the sleeve of his tunic.

"I told him how dangerous it would be. But one can't argue with him. He knows his own mind."

"Well," Brosset sighed, "I'm not going to quarrel with Colonel Boucard. Tell him I'll do the best I can. And now"—he seemed to shake off his depression—"the only gesture I can make in return is to insist you stay for lunch. And no excuses because I have a very special reason. Oursel," he shouted, turning to where the troopers were watering their horses.

"Sir?" The Sergeant glanced up smiling.

"Are you game for a return match? You beat me last time, but you won't get away with it again. That's if it is all right with you, Piatte."

"Delighted," Piatte said, smiling for the first time. "But don't make it last till nightfall."

"I've a good mind to do so and take you on patrol with me." Brosset's voice was without a hint of sarcasm. "We'll begin right away. You gentlemen make yourselves at home and we'll eat in an hour's time. Come on, Oursel. Drop that work and come with me. You haven't seen my new

board. I burnt the squares into the table with a hot poker one night so that anyone up here on duty could have a game." He laughed and strode off towards the gate through which a line of dust-caked Zouaves were patiently filing into the fort.

CHAPTER 7

"IT'S odd," Brosset said when the orderly had cleared the table and was washing the tin plates beside the well, "to imagine some tribesman up there who'll soon be sitting in my cage down here. Because I mean to bring one down, whatever the odds. Some big, hawk-nosed fellow for preference. But I must say"—he waved impatiently at the blue cigar smoke which lingered in the air—"I wish the Colonel had left me Coudin. That man has a sixth sense, a kind of instinct."

"When will you make this raid?" D'Auberon had been watching Brosset with ill-concealed fascination. He could not forget what Piatte had told him whilst they rested beneath the shade of the mastick trees. It had come as a disturbing shock to learn that Brosset was in such danger. So that all the preparations for the luncheon party, the biscuit boxes dragged out from the fort, the crude plank spread with a blanket and the primitive eating utensils, had the aspect of settings in some play whose climax was already known. He could hardly bring himself to look at Brosset as the young man grinned back cheerfully.

"At dawn." Brosset's voice was confident. "Dawn is the best time. The Duzair don't care overmuch for night fighting, not unless there is something very special on hand. So the chances are they'll be snug inside their huts. Remember that, d'Auberon. It might come in useful one day."

"I will," d'Auberon said fervently, mopping at his face. Beneath the heavy branches of the mastick tree, he felt cut off, imprisoned in a small, hot world and quite isolated from the mountains which now seemed shrouded in a blue grey blanket of misty heat.

"Incidentally, Henri," Brosset said thoughtfully, "if I do manage to lay this prisoner by the heels, I suppose the Colonel will want him back at the fort? Is he in a great hurry?"

"He is very impatient now," Piatte nodded. "I have a feeling he has some news that he is keeping to himself."

"Ah, the Leopard, no doubt," Brosset said nonchalantly.
"But one doesn't bother about him any more. He is outmoded, just an old antique."

"You think so! Then what about the Duzair?"

"Local trouble, my boy. Just feeling their wings. Unpleasant enough, I grant you, but not on the old scale. But the Leopard, now; *mon Dieu*, those were days. It's a pity in some ways we chased him into Morocco."

"There's nothing to stop him coming back."

"Perhaps. But why should he? He's not a young man and the tribes have let him down too often. He could count on the Duzair and may be two or three other tribes. But what's that against the force we can bring against him. You know"—he puffed at his cheroot and grew suddenly serious—"I don't think old Boucard has ever got over the Leopard. I was listening to him once—you know the way he goes on. Suddenly, it occurred to me that it was an obsession. You know what I mean—a personal struggle that had become a matter of honour. He told me how many times he had been in action against the man; some fantastic figure. But he'd always slipped through his hands. And I found myself looking at him and thinking, 'It's gone to your head, old man. You've got a bug inside that skull of yours that won't leave you alone. It will chase you, nag you until you run round in circles or ride out into the mountains on your own.' And I believe he would too, the old ruffian."

"Sagun doesn't make it any easier," Piatte said. "It was a pity they sent him there."

"Oh, I don't know. He was born to die in harness."

"But not that way. You know he was right over the Kashani valley affair. It was just bad luck. Otherwise he might have been a general."

"The Kashani valley?" D'Auberon's face relaxed. He was glad the conversation was moving away from the raid.

"You don't know?" Brosset seemed surprised.

"It was two years ago," he said, "and the Colonel was an old man then. You wouldn't think it, would you, that he fought with Napoleon? In a way that's been his downfall. He couldn't forget it and nor could several others."

"That's the trouble in the Army. It's clean enough when you can sit round a table like this with the enemy just round the corner. We're roughly the same age. We aren't worried about promotion and whether General Leblanc or Pichot, or whatever his name is, has good table manners and a knack of getting round politicians. No—we worry about little things ; the meat, the stinking wine, a tear in one's coat. But go up half a dozen ranks"—he waved his cheroot—"and the trouble begins. Talk about dog eating dog. It's like a herd of goats fighting over a blade of grass."

"But the Colonel," asked d'Auberon. "How does he come into this?"

"He's a republican, old man. A worshipper of the Emperor. Do you remember—what was it—four years ago, when they brought his body back to Paris? The old man was walking about with tears in his eyes. It's a cult, but it's more than that for Boucard. He's sixty-five. And he fought in Spain. Then at Dresden, Leipzig and all through the '13 battles before Paris. And what's more, he couldn't forget it. He was serving the King then, but he threw that up pretty smartly and scampered off to his beloved Napoleon. Then there was Waterloo"—he wagged his finger at d'Auberon—"and after that the poor Colonel had to eat dirt to go on being a Colonel. What else could he do but serve on. But that wasn't easy—not unless he was ready to swallow his principles."

"He never got over that," Piatte said quietly.

"Of course not. And what's more tragic—it did him no good in the long run. For all his bowing and scraping, Boucard's still in everyone's black books. Republican soldiers aren't popular. Not in an army where Generals often owe their positions to Royalty. And poor Boucard never stooped that low. Never will—he's too much of a man."

"And that stopped him being promoted?" D'Auberon could remember the heavy face staring out over the parapet into the night.

"Not entirely. It helped ; helped a great deal. But the Colonel's besetting sin is that he is too good. He really does

know Africa. He's got it in his bones. And he acts on instinct, blind instinct every time."

"He is too good," Piatte said suddenly.

"You're right, my dear Piatte. And too sure of himself. He never hesitates to state his views and he's no man for polite conversation. He has enemies everywhere, especially amongst the younger men; de la Motte for instance. How he hates Boucard. Why? Because his only experience is Africa. And Boucard doesn't hesitate to remind him of it. Why—however much of a royalist you were—you couldn't help envying a man who'd fought with the Emperor. Could you now?" he asked, smiling round the table.

"But this valley you were talking about?"

"The Kashani valley? That was the Leopard again. Boucard had a column, I was serving with him. A humble capacity, you understand. Well—he had orders to stay round El Maan. It was all part of a larger plan, you see. We were just one column out of five. The Leopard was somewhere in the mountains. We didn't know where exactly; none of us except Boucard. He seemed to scent him out. And then—without a word to anyone—our column started marching up the Kashani valley, a very nasty narrow place where the rock goes up like a wall. We were in high spirits and Boucard was riding up and down the column, chatting to everyone—you know, Piatte, the way he does. We marched two days, before a galloper caught us up. It was orders to return at once, but Boucard just laughed and tore them up. He was so certain, you see. And so were we. It was quite infectious. He told us that we'd bring the Leopard back or die in the attempt. That was how it worked out for a lot of us.

"And it was bad luck: that was the devilish part. The Colonel took us to the right spot but we must have missed the Leopard by an hour. The embers were still burning. It was heartbreaking to come so far and miss him like that," Brosset said, clapping his hands like a boy.

"It was on the return journey that they caught us. We were going through the narrowest part of the valley, barely fifty yards across. Of course, they were waiting. They shot down the mules and cut the column in two. You've never

seen such a panic. The mules kicking and screaming and our soldiers firing blindly up at the rocks.

"That, was when I first began to understand Boucard. I'd liked him well enough up till then. But now it was different. Somehow it seemed as though he gave each one of us a part of himself. I can't explain it. But one felt a new determination; a certainty that we were going to succeed. You only had to look round—and there he was right at your elbow."

"He got the column out?"

"Oh yes—a good part of it," Brosset nodded.

"That was how he came to Sagun," Piatte explained.

"De la Motte wanted him court-martialled, but someone must have stood up for him. I believe they thought him so old that they just did not believe he could last much longer. So they sent him to a fort—like an old horse to grass—with explicit orders not to stir outside."

"That's why Sagun is such a wilderness," Brosset said. "You don't see many smiling faces, you must admit, d'Auberon. Everyone sits round in that place like prisoners in a cell. Only Audincourt is happy with his Arabs. And Hennessy—well—he'd be happy on a raft in the middle of the ocean."

"And what about you—are you happy?"

"I? Oh—I take life as it comes. That's why, to tell you the truth, I'm not so sorry as I make out to be left up here. I'm King of my own castle. Not a care in the world beside my little friends the Duzair. And, by the way, Piatte, talking of those Duzair, you'd better leave me another trooper. I shall need him if I'm to use my two gallopers to get the tribesman down to the fort."

"You can have Piechut," Piatte said.

"That's good of you. And now, gentlemen," Brosset rose to his feet, "I've been talking too much. I've still got that game to finish. If you'll excuse me," he said, smiling at d'Auberon and walking away towards the fort.

* * * * *

The sun was still high when the column prepared to leave. Under Coudin's eagle gaze, the Zouaves were drawn up in

four ranks, loaded almost to the eyes with blankets and equipment so that it seemed as though the weight must imprison them in the sand. But Coudin's mind was not with the expectant soldiers to whom any journey was a change from the monotony of El Oud. His eyes kept straying towards Brosset who stood, talking and laughing with the Chasseur officers.

"But seriously," Brosset was saying, "it's most unsporting of you to leave me without the satisfaction of a return game. Don't look so smug, Oursel," he said, laughing and jabbing his finger in the direction of the Sergeant who was sitting relaxed in the saddle a few yards away.

"No, sir," Oursel said, knowing it useless to force a smile. "Take care of yourself, Lieutenant." He raised his hand to his cap in a silent salute.

"Ah, that reminds me." Brosset was still smiling. "There's a small matter, my dear Piatte. A trifle, if you'd be so kind."

"What is it?" Piatte knew what was coming.

"A friend, Henri. You'll find her address amongst my things at the fort. It's not much of a present," Brosset said, undoing his collar and putting his hand inside his tunic. "Ah, there it is." He pulled out something on which d'Auberon could see the sun glinting and pressed it into Piatte's hand. "I'll be at Sagun in a few days to claim it back," he said, still smiling.

"If only I could stay with you." Despite himself, Piatte's voice was melancholy.

"But you don't play chess, Henri. So don't distress yourself. Besides, I'd drive you mad with my chatter."

"I'll tell the Colonel," Piatte said briefly.

"That will be a relief, Henri. He'd never have done this unless he had some plan in mind. And now, I want a final word with Coudin." Still smiling, Brosset walked over to the Sergeant, who received him with no change in his expression.

"So you are off, Coudin?" Brosset said.

"Yes, Lieutenant." Coudin's eyes wavered a moment and stared frankly at the Lieutenant's face.

"You'll be missing something, you old rascal."

"Look, sir—you know very well——" The walnut face was contorted.

"I know, I know," Brosset said.

"He didn't ought to have done it, Lieutenant."

"It's orders, Coudin."

"You can't hear orders if you happen to be deaf," said Coudin stubbornly. "It's been done before, Lieutenant. The Colonel's done it himself."

"No, Coudin." For a moment Brosset appeared to be deep in thought. "No, I can't do it," he said suddenly. "I just can't do it, Coudin. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

"You know your own mind, sir." The words were wrung reluctantly from Coudin's lips. "But I'm telling you all the same, you ought to have me here with you in the fort."

"You heard what I said?"

"Yes, sir. I heard you."

"Then hurry up. We are keeping them waiting."

"Very good, Lieutenant."

"Coudin!" Brosset's hand came out and clasped the Sergeant's in an impulsive grasp. For a moment they stood together, forgetful of the men about them.

"I've spoken to Sergeant Lamotte, sir," Coudin said at last, his voice rasping deeply as if it were experiencing difficulty in articulating. "You'll find him very satisfactory, Lieutenant. I don't think there's any more I can say." His expression had all the eloquence of a dumb animal, pleading with its master.

"Take care of yourself, Coudin."

"And you, Lieutenant." Coudin stepped back and saluted faultlessly. But his mind was going round like clockwork. He looked at the Lieutenant again and dropped his hand to his side. Then he turned about smartly and shouted an order to the Zouaves which brought them suddenly to attention beneath their heavy burdens.

* * * * *

Brosset watched them go from the gateway. He did not turn round until the last horsemen in the column were small,

black dots, bobbing gently in the shimmering air. Whilst he watched them, his face had been sad, wistful as a boy's. But now he was conscious that Sergeant Lamotte was hovering somewhere in the background ; that the new garrison must be watching, waiting for Lieutenant Brosset, into whose charge they had been delivered. And, shrugging his shoulders and resuming his smile, he walked swiftly through the gates and into the fort ; forgetful of the mountains which brooded silently amidst the clouds.

CHAPTER 8

“**N**OW listen, Zeller,” Boucard said as Piatte closed the door behind him. “You’ve heard the news from El Oud—and that’s bad in all conscience. ~~But~~ there’s something else,” he went on stealthily, watching the unsuspecting face.

“Something else, Colonel?” Zeller felt no stirring of disquiet.

“I didn’t want to tell you until I was certain,” Boucard said, beginning to stare at Zeller with his powerful eyes. Years ago he had discovered that if he stared long enough, some alchemy began to work. It all sprang from a belief in oneself; a certainty that one was right. That was why it must be used sparingly, only when the occasion demanded. As it did now—with the wooden, trusting Zeller whose loyalty and complicity he needed.

“Yes, I’m certain now,” he went on. “And it’s no light matter: something very, very serious that concerns us both.”

“Well, Colonel?” Zeller’s face was still unconcerned.

“You’ll be interested to hear,” Boucard said with a faint sensation of annoyance, “the Leopard is back.” He shot the words out casually and was rewarded by an immediate start of surprise.

“The Leopard!” Zeller’s eyes bulged curiously, one hand sought and found the other. “How do you know?” he asked.

“One of Audincourt’s contacts. A tribesmen who had a long-standing grudge. It was genuine, I’m certain. He brought the news of his own free will.”

“He is here—now?”

“No. That’s the trouble. I sent him back for more news but he didn’t return. One of Audincourt’s Arabs found his body—about twenty kilometres south of the village.”

“Duzair?” Zeller smiled grimly, anxious to keep the excitement from his voice.

“Audincourt is not certain. But it seems that he must

have been on his way back to us. He must have had news which was important. And I'm certain I can guess what it was."

"I would not have believed it," Zeller said gravely. "The man must be a fanatic. What chance of success can he possibly expect?"

"It depends," Boucard said. "Even a man like that won't expect Algeria to fall like an over-ripe apple. But there's no reason why he shouldn't cause us plenty of trouble. You know what heartbreak it is, searching for him in these mountains."

"And what are you going to do, Colonel? Will you send the news to Oran by the telegraph?"

"I'm not sure." Boucard was watching Zeller carefully.

"But you said you were certain——"

"I was certain about the Kashani valley. And look where that got me."

"But this is very different. You have explicit orders. There's no other alternative."

"No?" Boucard was staring at him shrewdly.

"But you know, Colonel——" Zeller's eyes had begun to waver.

"What do I know? I know nothing unless I can take a prisoner. The Caid won't open his mouth. That's why I ordered Brosset to go on patrol."

"I mean—I mean—that you," Zeller was staring at him fascinated. Like a rabbit, Boucard thought. But that was not a fair comparison. Zeller was brave enough. But as a subordinate, never a man to act on his own initiative.

"You mean that I know? Eh?" Boucard permitted himself a smile. But I must be cautious now, he thought. Don't hurry him.

"Of course you know. You're Colonel Boucard, aren't you?"

"You flatter me, Zeller. Yes, I'm Colonel Boucard. But how much is that worth? Do you imagine de la Motte puts any value on my opinion. Do you think he'd listen if I put forward a suggestion? And you know what my suggestion would be?"

"You'd go after him." Zeller let the words out in an awed voice. "You would too, Colonel," he said, proud despite his misgivings.

"Of course," Boucard said, touched and a little disturbed despite himself. "In war, you have to act on instinct. It's too big a matter for intellect. There's no time. You can only judge when you are there, on the spot, at the exact moment. If you hesitate, you are finished. But you must not allow yourself to hesitate. Once you have the *feel* of a situation, you know instinctively." His voice seemed to fill the room, booming and confident.

"Colonel." Zeller seemed infected with the same spirit. Instinctively, he stood up, taking a pace towards the table. His usually inexpressive face was working strangely, the brows drawn down, the mouth slightly agape. It seemed to Boucard that two instincts must be struggling in his solid brain; caution and that inexplicable fire which he, Boucard, had been guilty of igniting. He sat back, watching patiently.

"Colonel," Zeller said again, "when you talk like that, I'm helpless. You know it. I think you take advantage of me. But I can't resist you," he said pathetically. "I trust you and you do something to me that makes me feel—well—lightheaded. You know I'd follow you anywhere. You don't need me to tell you that. Sometimes it frightens me. But this time—this time"—his face was crumpling and Boucard waited impassively—"it's different. You've got the Kashani valley behind you. You know what they'll think in Oran. You've got to tell them, Colonel. It's not myself I'm thinking of, but you. You know they hate you. They've been waiting for a chance like this. And you can't afford to take the risk. You can't," he cried.

"No?" Boucard said. "Perhaps you are right, Zeller." He was thinking of the reception he would get in Oran; the cold-shouldering, the supercilious smiles that mocked his own fierce certainty. That was how it was when you grew old. You sat listening to young cubs half your age; impotently because you knew they imagined you old and stupid and a nuisance. And you couldn't do anything about it! You were right. Your mind told you that what you said made

sense. But there was an argument to counter each idea that came into your brain. For a time, you stood it, listening to children who had been at school when you were learning your trade. Children whose only experience lay in Africa ; in piddling little actions that were laughable when you recalled the great battles. And then, suddenly, you couldn't stand it any more. You got up and thumped the table and all the words that made sense got confused and inexplicably stuck in your throat. Then they looked at you ; amused at first but the annoyance growing in their eyes. You knew they reckoned you a performing bear ; a picturesque old veteran whose brain-pan had been burnt out in the sun. For a little while they were prepared to be tolerant, to listen to the witless old fool prattling about his years of service. But, because a bear can be dangerous, they soon began to rattle the chain. The tolerant amusement died away. Sooner or later someone would remind him of the Kashani valley. And then, then he was out of it, ignored, silenced, spluttering in a corner whilst the clear young voices went on and on and the confident faces peered down at maps whose contours in blue and purple meant nothing unless you'd ridden through those valleys yourself and experienced the heat and the sheer rock and the pitiless blue sky with the sun that was a greater enemy than the Arabs.

But this time—it would be different. It would be impossible to ignore what he had to say. But was he going to tell them everything ? The thought went round irritatingly in his mind. Then he became aware that Zeller was staring at him ; like a faithful dog who watches his master entering a rough sea. He knew suddenly that he must take some decision ; that some part of his secret knowledge must be sacrificed.

“ Can you, Colonel ? ” Zeller was saying anxiously. “ You must see that you can't keep this information bottled up. It's too dangerous.”

“ But I'm not going to keep it bottled up.” Boucard felt better immediately. The pieces in his mind came together with a jerk. Confidently, he went on : “ You can't imagine I'd be as stupid as that. Of course I shall tell them. But there's no great hurry. And unless I have proof—are they

going to believe me? I'll tell them I know there is trouble working up. And, once I'm certain, I'll go to Oran myself."

"They may order you to stay here," Zeller said uncertainly.

"They can't——" Boucard began and then recalled the telegraph. What a devilish contraption, clipping a man's wings. In the old days, a commander was left to his own devices. He was trusted, considered fit to take his own decisions. And how well it worked. A soldier acted on intuition; on some spirit within him that told him when the right moment came. How could that happen any more when one was tied, merely an agency for information passed down the coast by a series of new-fangled telegraphs? It cut right across everything he had been taught. What could a man, miles away know about a situation! How could he judge, peering at maps and nattering about overall plans. The whole thing was nonsense. Men weren't brought up to rely on themselves any more. This remote control must have been invented by some third-rate creature anxious never to have to take a decision. He remembered suddenly that he must be cautious. Yet it required some effort before he could speak calmly.

"I'll talk them over"—his voice was still thick—"but I shall go about it in my own way. They can believe me finished if they want to. But we'll see about that in due course."

"What will you tell them?" Zeller looked at the flushed face. He was suddenly anxious for the Colonel; longing to shield him from indignity and his own overriding nature.

"I'll tell them the truth," Boucard said and then paused.

"You've known me a long while, haven't you?" His question was more like a command.

"Yes, Colonel."

"You don't believe I'm finished, I understand!"

"Colonel?"

"I can see you mean what you say. Now how far are you prepared to back me. Take your time, man. Don't speak too soon."

"I'd back you"—Zeller licked his lips and hesitated—"in any reasonable situation," he said.

"What do you mean by reasonable?"

"You know what I mean, Colonel Boucard."

"But not beyond, eh?"

"That depends."

"Depends on—what?" Boucard could almost feel Zeller's will giving way; like a tree that struggles to retain its strength as the axe-men chop the final section.

"On you." Zeller's voice was surprisingly steady.

"You mean—if I order you to do something—you'd do it. But you wouldn't like it?"

"No—I don't mean that."

"Come on—no holding back."

"Oh, you know very well I'd follow you anywhere." It was out and Zeller's face was pale with annoyance; the words wrung reluctantly from somewhere deep inside.

"Zeller," Boucard said. He heaved himself out of his chair and walked around the table. He was touched, almost upset by the man's devotion. And because of this, he hated himself the more for what he had done. He put his hand lightly on Zeller's shoulder.

"Yes, Colonel!" The heavy lidded eyes stared reproachfully.

"Give me your hand, man. I was only testing you. I had to know." Boucard seized him by the hand and squeezed it warmly. "I had to know exactly where I stood," he said briefly, moving away towards the window. "And I'm grateful to you, Zeller, deeply grateful. It's not everyone who would stand by an old man like me." He knew that Zeller's eyes were following him; could almost gauge their expression.

"Now listen," he said, anxious lest Zeller should worry himself into a state, "don't get the impression I'm going to do anything rash. You believe that, eh?"

Zeller nodded, but doubtfully.

"Well, get it into your brain," Boucard said. "You may not think so now, but I'm telling you the truth. Look here," he said with sudden desperation, "I promise you I won't leave this fort without permission. Now does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, Colonel, that does." Zeller looked up with a new

expression. Like a man snatched suddenly from the guillotine, thought Boucard, and almost chuckled.

"I thought it might. I'm no fool, you know, whatever others may think."

"But if you don't——" Zeller was thinking painfully. "If you don't get permission—how can you go after the Leopard?" He had begun to wish that Boucard had never begun this conversation. If he had given straightforward orders—it would have been more understandable.

"You leave that to me," Boucard said, "don't trouble your head any more until I tell you when to march. Just trust me—and remember that promise." It was amazing how the idea had come. Immediately after giving Zeller that promise. One moment he had been desperate, almost beaten, and ashamed that he was implicating Zeller in his own schemes. The next—it was suddenly there. As though God had opened his brain-pan from above and popped it inside. And I was worried about growing old, he thought, feeling a strange intoxication that made him light headed with an urge to shout and wave his arms.

"Very well, Colonel." Zeller was still there; momentarily Boucard had forgotten him. Now he stood like an old sheepdog, hesitant to take his leave.

"That's all," he said quickly. "I'll send a message by the telegraph today. And not a word about this, Zeller—you understand?"

"But of course. You don't think I'd——" Zeller looked pained.

"Of course not. Two old friends like ourselves. And listen—the slightest news from Brosset, I'm to have immediately. Immediately—you understand."

"Yes, Colonel. I'm not happy about the garrison at El Oud."

"And now am I. But we must wait." The vision of the Duzair were dancing in Boucard's mind. Just Brosset, he thought, just Brosset and that tiny garrison. He suddenly glimpsed what was really in his mind and was appalled. Somewhere in the Bible he had read—years ago it must have been—something about Abraham sacrificing his son on the

altar—that was it. But the sacrifice had been called off. It hadn't taken place. And perhaps—but no, he must put the thought out of his mind. It wasn't as if he had planned it—the idea had come to him here, in this room—only a moment ago. He was aware that Zeller was staring at him, could feel the perspiration pricking out on his body.

“Have a relief standing by,” he said hoarsely. “Put Hennessey at an hour's notice to march.”

“Yes, Colonel.”

“That's all,” Boucard said harshly, desperately anxious to be alone.

CHAPTER 9

PIECHUT could never remember what time it began. Probably after midnight because he'd seen the new sentry come on duty from where he was perched uncomfortably amidst the unyielding branches of the mastick tree.

Lieutenant Brosset hadn't approved. Quite an argument they had had before Picchut managed to explain that he couldn't sleep at all, cooped up inside El Oud. Now—he knew how right he had been. He swung his legs over the branch. If only the moon would come out from behind that dark bank of cloud.

As he listened, it seemed that leaves had suddenly begun to rustle. But there were no trees out there and not a breath of wind stirred the branches where he was hidden. He was aware of a peculiar chill. He could see the sentry, leaning on the parapet, his musket pushed out. Piechut wondered whether he should risk a shout. He opened his mouth but the words choked suddenly as a silver of moonlight peeped from amidst the cloud and two shadows went flitting past within ten yards of his tree. Again his horse moved restlessly, tethered beneath the tree.

Piechut knew exactly what must be done. Long years in the mountains had drilled in the necessity. Silently, he slithered down the trunk and groped for the long cord. As he began to pull, his horse recognised him and came edging forward. He could smell the sweat on her coat. In a moment, he had touched her muzzle and knew he was safe. One whinney and he would have been done. He patted the damp neck, put a foot in the stirrup and was into his saddle. He bent down, pulled his carbine from its bucket, slipped back the catch and settled it gently under one arm. As he dug his knees hard into the mare's flanks he felt her bound forward, heard the stones rattling under her hooves. The darkness seemed to fly past him. He was suddenly aware of a white figure scuttling out of his path. Just a minute more, he

thought, feeling an immense coldness. He began to fumble with the carbine, bringing it up so that the muzzle pointed into the darkness ahead. He was well clear of the fort before he pressed the trigger.

Brosset was aware of the shot through his dreams. He had been somewhere in the mountains, marching, and it had been insufferably hot. In the act of waking, he snatched up his pistol and was on his knees, struggling out of the blanket before the dream vanished and he was in the darkness of the hut. He heard a second shot and stumbled over the legs of a sleeping Zouave. By the time he was through the doorway, the tribesmen were coming over the walls.

He shouted loudly for Lamotte, but his voice was lost in the panic noises of awakening. The tribesmen came on quite silently, engulfing the sentry so that he sank beneath them, too surprised to utter any sound. Belatedly, two muskets banged off; shatteringly loud. A horse neighed in terror as two white figures pulled a trooper from the saddle. Near the gate there was a sudden shouting and the noise of wooden bars rasping back.

"Get to the fort!" Brosset shouted. But the second horse reared up, crying out in outraged surprise as its rider fell out of the saddle, vanishing amidst a struggling mass of figures which moved as though in silent motion.

A man loomed up, hesitated, and then made straight for him, a curved sword rising up in an arc. Brosset's pistol went off, a small stab of red fire, and the tribesman seemed to hesitate once more, turning sideways as if caught unprepared, before collapsing slowly; a bundle of white clothing.

Brosset felt for his sword and remembered it was in the hut. But there was no time so he seized the pistol by its muzzle, swinging it like a club and ran towards the gate. The fort seemed crowded with tribesmen. But his one thought was whether the trooper in the mastick tree had got clear.

Piechut's image was still in his mind, when it suddenly seemed as if the tribesmen were all around him. They must have risen up out of the darkness, and be crushing him with their weight. He tried to raise the pistol and felt a dull sensation all down his arm. Faces closed in. He could not

comprehend why his arm was dead. Then his eyes seemed to explode forward out of his face and it was suddenly silent. He put out his good hand to save himself from falling, clutched at a patch of white cloth.

* * * * *

It took a long time before he understood what was happening. At first, he had imagined he must be in a boat. There was a storm raging, tossing the craft from side to side and yet there was no danger of falling out because some sailor had tied him tightly to the seat. He must have been tied face downward because his nose was pressing into the wood. It was very difficult to breathe because the boat kept pitching all the time. Sometimes there were little flashes of fire which twinkled near his eyes. There was an unpleasant taste in his mouth. But he was not aware of being thirsty.

It was only when the boat stopped pitching that he realised he was not at sea at all. He heard voices and people were bending over him; lifting him out of the boat and peering into his face with eyes that made no sense because he could not recognise their faces. After a time, he was conscious that they were carrying him away. And suddenly he smelt the familiar scent of horses and realised that he must have been on a journey. But it was so soft and pleasant when they laid him down that he could not bring himself to try to understand a voice that was whispering beside him. He had heard that voice somewhere before. But now he closed his eyes and drifted off into a curious darkness where no one appeared to want to bother him.

* * * * *

After he had recovered consciousness, Brosset began to wish that anyone but Gaston had survived the debacle. He had never seen a man almost out of his mind with terror. And the fact that Gaston was desperately afraid seemed to have shrunk him since Brosset had seen him in the fort. His tongue moved in a continuous circuit round his lips. Yet there was water in plenty in the earthenware jar in one corner of the tent.

"Lieutenant." Gaston's cheeks were hollow, his eyes bright with fever. "You know what they'll do to us, don't you? You saw what happened to the rest of them in the fort?" He sat up and Brosset thought he was about to seize him by the throat in his agony of apprehension. But then he sank back again, quite exhausted, on to a filthy sheepskin and kept up his complaints in a low, monotonous chant.

"But I forget you didn't see it, did you, Lieutenant Brosset? You were lucky, you were sleeping like a baby while it was going on all round you."

"Well—what were you doing." The pain was making Brosset irritable.

"Lying on the ground, waiting my turn. I couldn't move, not with this bullet in my chest. Just as if someone had hit me with a rock. That Sergeant Lamotte." He was wringing his hands together, edging about uncomfortably and wincing with each movement.

"Lamotte?" Brosset felt the pains surging up behind his eyes. He felt nothing in his arm. But his head was different. They had done something to him. Through the pain which was all coloured, as though with little lanterns at a fête, he was conscious of Gaston.

"The Sergeant shot me!"

"Shot you?"

"I was trying to get the gate open and an Arab jumped down on my back. Before I knew where I was, I saw the Sergeant put his musket up and something hit me in the chest."

"He must have been shooting at the Arab."

"Do you think so?" Gaston's tongue ceased licking. He considered the idea.

"Don't be ridiculous. Can you imagine the Sergeant wanting to kill you?" Brosset tried to smile.

"I never thought of that." Gaston's face brightened. "'Course, come to think of it, I suppose he wouldn't. But I got it into my mind——" He stopped, turning the idea over and over. At last he seemed to reach a solution. "I see it now," he said.

"And what happened after—after——"

"Don't talk about it, Lieutenant. I thought they'd do the

same to me. But some big Arab came and gave them orders. They lifted me up and tied me across a horse. That was when I first saw you, Lieutenant. But you were unconscious. I don't think you knew anything until they brought us here. That was two days ago. And you know where we are, sir? You know what they want out of us?" The look was coming back into his eyes.

"Be quiet," Brosset said fiercely.

"Why should I be quiet? We're both in the same boat. They'll torture us both."

"You're a Zouave, aren't you?"

"What do you mean by that?" The voice was fierce. Brosset was aware of the hatred that flowered from Gaston's fear.

"Hold on to yourself," Brosset said quietly. "Get it into your head that there are more important things than just you or I."

"I don't understand." Gaston's voice was growing querulous. "All I know is that I don't like being here."

"Like it!" Brosset was suddenly convulsed with laughter. It shook him so that his head began to hurt again and he had to lie quiet. At the other side of the tent he could hear Gaston muttering. After a time, he raised himself on his left arm. His chest still shook gently.

"Ah—but you are past believing anything," the voice went on. "Laughing when you should be crying. As if things weren't bad enough."

"Gaston."

"It's no good, Lieutenant, you can't change my mind. I can't hope to hold out—even if I wanted to—and no more can you."

"Listen, Gaston. You've got to try. Remember the men in your company."

"Do you think that's going to be any help? It's all right for you, Lieutenant—an officer. Talk like that comes easy to you."

"I'm a Frenchman just like you. A moment ago you said we were both in the same boat. And there's only one thing we can do about it."

"And what might that be?" Despite his fear, Gaston began to feel a flicker of hope.

"There's no hope for us anyway—so we might as well put a good face on it. If you show no fear they'll respect you. If you cringe—it will only be worse. And there's more to it than that," he cried. "We may be wounded and covered in filth, but we are still French soldiers. That means something, doesn't it."

"Not to me, Lieutenant."

"You mean—it doesn't?" Checked in his enthusiasm, Brosset stared at his companion. If only Coudin was here, he thought regretfully.

"Look, Lieutenant." The hatred was back in Gaston's voice. "I told you it was all right for you. You see things your way. But now it's different. And I want to stay alive. Do you hear that?" he asked fiercely. "It's not much to ask. You do what you want, Lieutenant, and leave me alone."

"But you're not going to tell them anything?" For the first time Brosset began to feel apprehensive.

"And why not. What harm can it do?"

"What harm! Why, man, you are off your head." In his efforts to get up, Brosset lost his balance and fell back on the sheepskin, bringing back the pain with such intensity that he could only lie silent, gasping and hardly conscious of the voice that now filled him with loathing.

"You didn't see what they did to the others in the fort. You'd think different if you had."

"You're not to say a word," Brosset gasped, still struggling with the pain. He was aware that, in some way, Gaston had wounded him. "I'm trusting you, Gaston," he said. "I don't believe you know what you are talking about. But no Frenchman would talk the way you do and mean it."

"No, Lieutenant?" The man stared at him intently for a moment and paused as though about to go on. But, almost immediately, his lips began to twitch again and he let himself drop back onto the sheepskin, turning from side to side as though endeavouring to escape. For a time Brosset stared at him. He could not comprehend that a man should be so

destroyed with fear. It's because we are alone, he told himself desperately. Because we are all alone. But as the day drew on, he found himself hating Gaston with a passion that seemed to fill the tent. At times he prayed his companion might die before the interrogation began.

Shortly after nightfall, they heard the sound of horses. There was a sudden shouting and he guessed that some person of importance must have arrived. The yelling continued until it died away in a confusion of indeterminate sound. Then the silence crept back and they were alone in the tent. Gaston had fallen asleep and Brosset permitted himself to look at his face.

When he saw the sunken eyelids, the pitiful mouth, he began to hate himself. He wanted suddenly to wake up Gaston and implore his pardon; to explain that now he understood exactly why Gaston had spoken as he did.

The tribesman came so softly that Brosset had hardly time to waken before they had lifted him from the ground. He heard Gaston's sudden cry of terror and then a smothered yelp. Next moment, he was out in the starlight, carried between four Duzair who bore him along without a word. A few yards away, Gaston was being hurried along in a similar fashion. There was no time to say a word; the journey proceeding with silent speed towards a large tent that showed black in the half light.

Only when they were passing beneath a canvas doorway did he find himself beside his companion as the bearers seemed to hesitate, holding a muttered conversation between themselves. Quickly, he put out his hand and touched Gaston's:

"Don't hold it against me," he said softly. "I understand you now."

"I feel better now it's begun."

"Courage," Brosset whispered. His companion's answer was lost as the tribesmen moved forward, pushing their way inside so that the light struck Brosset unexpectedly, causing him to blink violently and shut his eyes.

Roughly, he was decanted onto his feet, his knees giving way until two Arabs seized him beneath the shoulders and

held him, half hanging between them. Opening his eyes, he saw that Gaston was similarly propped up a few paces away. The tent seemed crowded with tribesmen, staring as though the prisoners were rare and precious birds. Brosset felt his eyes beginning to hurt again. The heat was overpowering. Somewhere a voice had begun to speak in French.

When he opened his eyes again it was to see a small, delicate-featured man talking to Gaston. The Arab's face was gentle, the eyes large and luminous above a grave mouth. His French was excellent, the nose fiercely curved. Suddenly Brosset realised that this must be the Leopard. He had seen the pencilled sketches too often to have any doubt.

"You are from the Zouave regiment?" The Emir was gazing intently into Gaston's face, which was working in strong, twitching spasms. At first, it did not appear that he had heard the question. Then he started, as if something had suddenly resolved itself in his mind and nodded his head.

"All the others at El Oud were killed?" The voice was soft, very compelling and the eyes possessed a soothing hypnotic quality. Gaston nodded again.

"How many men are in your battalion at Sagun?" Brosset heard the question clearly.

"How many men——" The Emir's voice repeated the question and Brosset forced himself to await the answer. He knew that he could no longer blame his companion.

"How many men?" The Emir's tone had changed. His mouth was a sudden cruel line amidst the black beard.

"How many?" Gaston repeated thickly. His face was blank, already dead. Only his eyes moved, tortured with indecision. Suddenly he turned his head and stared at Brosset. He tried to smile, but only the muscles round his mouth twitched spasmodically. Hanging between his captors, he had caught the attention of every Arab in the tent. Even the Emir's eyes flickered towards the Lieutenant and then back to the Zouave. There was an immense silence broken suddenly by Gaston's voice.

"You were right, Lieutenant." His lips trembled and the words slipped out broken and disjointed. In the same moment, the Emir bent forward and gripped him by the

shoulder, as though to prise an answer from him. It was then that Gaston spat in his face.

Brosset closed his eyes against the sudden shouting. He knew what they were doing and was glad because that way Gaston could suffer little. But each sound hurt him with a peculiar pain because it was through him that the Zouave was dying. He was filled with a weariness that was beyond pride or soldierly feeling so that he knew with appalling clarity that he was suddenly old with knowledge, and a prey to pity. And, oddly, he was glad, because this was how he would have wished to die. He felt tears coming into his eyes and resented the fierce pressure of the arms which held him.

When the noise had died away, he felt a gentle pressure on his shoulder. Opening his eyes, he saw the Emir's face ; very close so that he noticed the peculiar blackness of the irises. He was interested to see the Leopard so close, but now that the time had come, it did not seem important. He began to feel that he had already died a little. And with Gaston, lying not far away, this did not seem strange and certainly not alarming. He fixed his gaze somewhere above the Emir's eyes and waited.

"And you too?" The voice was so warm with understanding that the past moments might never have existed. "You too will reply in the same way." Brosset nodded silently.

"Why should you spit at me?" the voice went on. "I find it difficult to understand. Surely, in your country, it is honourable that a man should defend his home?"

"But—yes." Brosset was shaken from his private world.

"Then why should you spit? Is it that you consider I am unclean? Or is it that your common soldiers are addicted to this habit. You are an officer. Do you too spit?"

"No." Brosset was confounded.

"Then it is very foolish. And also unclean. I have a high opinion of French officers. I have had prisoners before. But none have spat at me."

"He was an ordinary soldier. It was his way—of being brave." Brosset was desperately anxious that the Leopard should understand.

“Brave?” The eyebrows curved enquiringly.

“He had no words—he was frightened of dying. But he was brave; he defied you. What else could he do?” Brosset was almost shouting.

“You mean—it was his gesture—the last word of a man who is prepared to die.”

“Yes.” Brosset’s voice was eager.

“I wish that I had known.” The Emir sounded regretful. “But even so such a gesture could not have passed unnoticed. Yet he could have had—a more fitting death.” The graceful hand gestured, touched Brosset’s shoulder. “And you?” The eyes prised into Brosset’s. “If your soldiers answer questions in this way—what must I expect from an officer?”

“You have your answer there.” Brosset nodded towards the tribesmen vanishing through the doorway with their burden. He had intended his words should be impressive. But now—with this talk of spitting—his purpose had been turned to a farce.

“I understand.” The gravity in the Emir’s voice restored his confidence. “It is in my heart to honour a man who bears himself bravely amongst his enemies. In battle it is a common quality—given almost to every man. But alone—without friends—with only your heart for guidance——” He ceased speaking and beckoned to a burly tribesman who came forward, a smile of anticipation in his eyes.

“You, Hussein. See that this officer is cared for. Dress his wounds, give him meat and drink. And treat him well. His safety is on your head.”

“Sidi,” the man said, and the pleasure was gone from his face. He made a gesture with his fingers to the tribesmen holding Brosset.

CHAPTER 10

CAPTAIN HENNESSY spat out a mouthful of dust and stepped aside to let the column lurch past. But not one of the familiar faces seemed to recognise him. Each Zouave had his eyes fixed doggedly on the bent shoulders of the man in front and their legs moved with a heavy regularity, churning up the sand so that it rose, enveloping them in a dusty cloud which hung behind long after they were gone.

Hennessy walked down the column until he found Lieutenant Jacquot, who smiled through a heavy mask of dust and gestured to where de Courcy's troopers were riding some distance from the column.

"Lucky devils." His boyish face had a natural good humour. "Just think of them—riding out there—able to breathe properly with their backsides snug in a saddle."

"Any sign of 'bu?"

"No. When we started off, I could see him not far behind. In the last hour he must have dropped right back. But don't worry, Coudin is with him."

"Lebel," Hennessy said contemptuously. "What an idea to send him out on a forced march. The Colonel should have sent Delange or Crespin. At least they would have kept up with us." He kept peering back through the dust, as if hoping to see Lebel and his Zouaves materialising from the empty desert.

"How much longer before we reach El Oud?" Jacquot was recalling the excitement in the fort that morning. He had been sleeping when Piechut had ridden in, but had run out in time to see the Chasseur standing beside his lathered horse whilst the Colonel, incongruous but far from ridiculous in the collarless shirt which bulged where he had hastily stuffed it into his trousers, had fired questions at him.

"Perhaps another two hours." Hennessy nodded towards the mountains which hung somewhere above the dust cloud. He was recalling the Colonel's face, flushed and imperative, the stream of orders, the sudden running to and fro and the

confusion in the horse lines. Boucard had gone off at a gallop, taking Piatte and d'Auberon. The Colonel's final words still echoed somewhere in his brain.

"March until you drop, but get there quickly." That was why he found himself hating Lebel; that useless, deformed creature so eaten up with self-pity that not an ounce of generosity existed in his nature. As if he cared about Brosset, he thought indignantly. He could imagine Lebel, preoccupied with his own worries, allowing his men to drop far behind. Whilst Brosset—— He clenched his teeth.

"You know," he said, "I've a feeling that Lebel and I will have a few words for each other when we reach El Oud."

"He can't help it." Jacquot's face was crimson beneath its mask. All the time, he kept dreaming of cool water; a great bucket drawn from an echoing well. It helped him forget the sand which had crept in beneath the cloth wound around his boots and was so irritating; innumerable little pinpricks around his hot feet.

"What do you mean—he can't help it?" Hennessy stared at him with tolerant affection. He was fond of Jacquot because he was young and generous; too generous by half and always making allowances, which was unnatural in a boy of his age.

"It's so easy for you to talk. You have soldiering in your blood—ever since those English chased you out of Ireland and made a civilised Frenchman of you."

"It was my grandfather," Hennessy said proudly. He liked to have the details right.

"Your grandfather then. But Lebel didn't have a grandfather who thought the only honourable profession a gentleman might serve was the Army."

"The Army is no profession." Despite the choking sand, Hennessy was indignant. "It's a——" he searched for the words—"a calling," he said.

"Well—it didn't call my grandfather either. And it only got me because I'd always buried my nose in stories about Africa. We haven't all inherited your high sense of honour. And most of us are weak at some time or other." His eyes were sparkling and he kept glancing sideways at his companion.

"You are talking nonsense," Hennessy said irritably.

"Why I should stay here, talking to a boy of your age——" He glanced along the column. "But there's no-one else," he said resignedly, beginning to smile.

Jacquot allowed himself to laugh. He admired Hennessy, was always anxious for his company. But you had to take him when the mood was right.

"If an officer can't support this country," Hennessy said obstinately, "he should send in his papers and get out. For himself—it doesn't matter, but when there are men under his command, it's a different matter."

"But—you must give a man a chance. Lebel hasn't had time to try his wings."

"No?" Hennessy was conscious of sudden, irrational rage. It was the heat and choking dust; had Lebel been there, he would have seized him by the throat. "The little swine," he said thickly. "You can see it in his eyes. I've found him shirking going round the sentries at night. Besides, why did he get himself sent off as Audincourt's assistant? Because he wanted a soft job: wanted to be away from foot-sore people like you or I. Oh, damn this filthy dust," he shouted, almost beside himself. "I tell you, Jacquot, we'll never get to the fort in time."

"So that's why you are in such a bad temper?" Jacquot looked at him anxiously.

"What else? Ever since we started off, I've had a dreadful feeling we were too late."

"But why? It's probably only a little raid. Brosset is a capable fellow. He can hold out a day or two."

"No." Hennessy shook his head. "I've known it ever since that galloper arrived. Something about Boucard's face—it was as if he'd known what was happening all the time. Did you see him?" Hennessy's light blue eyes had a sudden sadness.

Jacquot now felt thoroughly depressed. He began to hate the miles of desert that still lay ahead; the parched throats, the blistered feet that plodded endlessly in rhythmic unity. He was almost relieved when Hennessy began to hurry back towards the head of the column, his tall figure, half hidden

amidst the drifting dust. For a time, he continued to hate the country with all his heart.

Trudging at the head of his company, nearly a mile behind the main column, Lebel was torturing himself with pictures of El Oud. He hardly noticed de Courcy cantering up and was startled by the sudden violence in his voice.

"What the devil are you playing at?" De Courcy's dirt-stained face stared down and Lebel edged nervously away from the threatening proximity of his horses hooves.

"Doing?" He raised his eyes sulkily. "Why, what I'm ordered to do," he said shortly; "marching to El Oud."

"Then why have you fallen behind? Don't you realise I can't split up my men to take care of two columns. If you don't get moving I shall have to leave you and stay with Hennessy." De Courcy pulled at a handkerchief and wiped his face.

"I can't go any faster," Lebel said quickly. "We're marching as hard as we can and I don't want my men to drop before they reach the fort." He glanced up to see how de Courcy was taking it, dreading Coudin's cynical gaze which was boring relentlessly into the back of his neck. Why don't they leave me alone, he thought pettishly. They are always pushing me, cursing, telling me to do something quicker.

"Look, Lebel, I haven't got all day." De Courcy's voice was hard, its sharpness muffled as he fastened the handkerchief over his mouth. "I'll give you a chance to quicken up the pace. You can see the dust-cloud where Hennessy is marching now. But catch up, man." His voice rose to a sudden shout. "Otherwise I'll leave you here and take my troopers on."

"Oh all right," Lebel said, with a sudden fear at being left alone. "But we can't go much faster," he added grudgingly.

"We can go a good deal faster, Lieutenant." The voice at his elbow was hard with contempt. Turning, Lebel met Sergeant Coudin's eyes; deep pools of derision sunk in a grimy face.

"I didn't ask your opinion," he said sharply.

"No, Lieutenant, but you have it now." Coudin's eyes caught de Courcy's with implicit understanding. "We can keep up from now on, sir," he said, ignoring Lebel.

"Good." De Courcy reined in his horse and fell back, letting the Zouaves march past. "Remember," he shouted after Lebel, "if you don't keep going, I shall have to leave you."

Lebel said nothing, stalking ahead and biting his lower lip. He had been humiliated, shamed by a Sergeant. For a time he brooded, ignoring Coudin's shouts which impelled the column forward. He felt he was marching at the head of a machine. Because Coudin yelled orders, the machine responded, flowing on with increasing momentum. He was minded to lean back and slow its pace. But he could not raise the energy and it was some time before he spoke to Coudin in a grudging voice.

"So you've taken to giving orders, Sergeant?" Coudin's silence infuriated him. "Did you hear what I said," he cried at the top of his voice—so that the Zouaves in the leading file seemed to wake from their stupor, staring at him curiously before hunching their shoulders and resuming their plodding rhythm.

"I heard you very well, sir." Coudin's tone was non-committal.

"Then why don't you answer?"

"What can I say, Lieutenant?"

"You can say you are sorry."

"Sorry, sir? When I was doing my job."

"I'm in command of this column."

"Yes, sir."

"And when I give an order, I expect it to be obeyed."

"Naturally, sir." If it hadn't been for Lieutenant Brosset, Coudin would have enjoyed the game.

"It's not your place to take matters out of my hands."

"No, sir."

"Well, remember. Next time I won't let you off lightly."

"No, sir." Coudin narrowed his eyes and wriggled his shoulders beneath the pack straps. He was mentally cursing the Colonel for putting him at the mercy of this boy. Lieutenant Brosset would never behave like that. You could tell a man who had been through it—he knew his job and was reasonable. Not like this misshapen creature who displayed

his lack of guts so that every Zouave knew the sort of man who was leading them. His lips curled back. There was only one man in this company who was capable of taking charge when things went wrong.

"Is that Captain Hennessy's column?" Lebel pointed through the dust to where a mushroom-shaped cloud vibrated in the heat.

"Yes, Lieutenant. We ought to catch him up if we go on like this. And I'm thinking that none of us can go too fast. Not when we know what we can expect up at El Oud." He was biting his lip severely and glowering at the mountains.

"Do you think there'll be any fighting?" Lebel's voice was guarded.

"No, sir. I don't think so."

"But why not? They may rush us when we try to get through to the fort."

"The Colonel must be there by now," Coudin said grimly. "If there had been any firing, we should have heard it. No, sir—it's one thing or the other," he said, hating Boucard in his heart because he had left Brosset alone up there.

"One thing or the other?" Lebel looked at him curiously. He was feeling apprehensive, was anxious to be reassured. But some emotion was working powerfully in Coudin's face; so devastatingly that he found it wise to remain silent.

"He may be alive or he may be dead," Coudin said at last. His eyes were large and bright and he breathed suspiciously hard.

"Dead! But he can't be dead!" Lebel had never liked Brosset but the prospect distressed him none the less.

"No, sir?" Coudin's glance was full of hatred. If only it had been this little boy, he was thinking fiercely. If only Lieutenant Brosset had come down with the rest of us. He felt certain the Lieutenant must be dead and his simple emotions were capable only of finding expression in anger. He let the rage inside him bubble on quietly.

"You must be imagining things, Sergeant." Lebel had been listening intently. There was no sound of firing; only the rattle of equipment and the heavy breathing. He glanced

again at the leathery face. For a moment he could think of nothing to say, until a flippant sentence came effortlessly into his mind.

“ We’ve all got to die some time,” he said, and could have bitten off his tongue as the Sergeant stared at him with weary contempt.

CHAPTER 11

IT was curious the flag should still be flying ; hanging, reproachful, as if Brosset had left his imprint on the valley. Nothing seemed alive around the fort which lay inert and deserted on its little brown ridge some three kilometres away. The sun cut fiercely through Boucard's sweat-drenched uniform, striking the back of his neck with an insistent pressure. Only the sound of the horses breathing chestily broke the silence where the dust was settling round them.

"D'Auberon," he said gruffly, aware that the silence was beginning to tell, "take your men well out beyond the fort. Search the ground right up to the rocks. And keep an eye on the villages. You needn't expect any trouble. They will have gone hours ago. But they'll be watching."

"Yes, Colonel." D'Auberon was glad to be doing something. He would have preferred to have gone straight into the fort, whose silent walls drew him with a peculiar fascination. But he trotted away, calling to the troopers and glancing upward at the gaunt villages.

Boucard ordered Piatte to send the scouts forward, and then rode silently a little ahead of the troopers, conscious that they were watching. In his mind he knew exactly what to expect. He had foreseen it hours ago. He set his face and blew out his cheeks softly.

When the scouts had reached the ridge and dismounted, Boucard held up his hand and the men behind him reined in. Piatte rode up beside him, watching silently. There was no sound but the creak of leather and the breathing of the horses.

Boucard could see now that the gate was open, hanging limply on its hinges. It was like a picture, painted in vivid colours : the white fort on a brown ridge, the figures dark against the sand. In the background were the mountains and, beneath them, d'Auberon's troopers, raising clouds of dust which hung heavily in the air.

"It's all my fault," Boucard was thinking. "And yet it's given me a pretext that even de la Motte can't ignore."

Twenty-four hours ago, he would have felt exultant. But now his body seemed to have congealed, to have become a prison in which every breath was a profound and painful effort. In another moment, the scouts would be signalling. But already he was anticipating the familiar smell. He had never got used to it, had never ceased to resent its subtle implication.

"Look, Colonel." He had failed to notice the trooper creeping inside the gate. Now he was out again, waving and signalling like an excited marionette. It seemed as though he was jumping up and down ; trying to shake off the reality of what he had witnessed. Again, Boucard felt emotion welling up. He signalled to Piatte and dug his heels into Austerlitz's sides, grateful for momentary relief.

They rode until they reached the well beside the mastick trees. There Boucard dismounted and threw the reins to Gounod who received them silently, looking at the Colonel without expression. After a moment, in which he seemed to be reflecting, he got off his horse and stood watching the two figures hurrying forward. He knew the Colonel was about to witness something that must make him just a little older.

Boucard and Piatte walked up the ridge without speaking. At the top, they met a heavy odour that was sweet and unpleasant and would not go away. Both were anxious now to get inside, quickening their pace so that they seemed to be competing ; each thrusting himself forward as if the open gates were some dreadful prize.

They passed the scout who was leaning on his carbine. He said nothing, merely drawing himself up to attention ; the years of discipline asserting themselves with a drilled instinct. But his face told the Colonel all that was needed ; like grey linen it had a shrunken, crumpled expression. And Boucard hurried on.

It was Piatte who managed to enter first. He almost pushed Boucard aside and walked between the blistered gateposts.

"There's two of them missing, sir." He found himself staring into the expressionless face of a Corporal who was kneeling beside a body. Instinctively, he stepped backward,

cannoning into the Colonel who was looking round with a pinched expression.

Boucard walked slowly towards the small hut. He peered inside, but there was nothing except the overwhelming smell and some dark smudges covered with flies near the bottom of the wall. Everything, even the rough table and the biscuit boxes, had been carried away. Suddenly, he remembered that the Corporal had said something about two men being missing. He went back into the sunlight, controlling a desire to pull out his handkerchief. It's like a paint shop, he thought. He saw Piatte in conversation with the Corporal and walked towards them, carefully stepping across what the tribesmen had left to mark their raid.

"We've counted, Colonel." Piatte's face was drawn. "There are two missing."

"Who?" Boucard found he had to keep his eyes fixed firmly on the wall.

"We can't tell, sir." The Corporal got to his feet. "Christ, what a place," he said fiercely. "The horses are the only creatures we can recognise. God! those flies!" He slapped savagely at his cheek.

"Is Brosset here?" Boucard asked. "Can you remember any detail, Piatte. Didn't he wear a gold ring on one finger?"

"Yes. On the left hand." Piatte was staring at the Corporal.

"That's not much help, sir." The man gestured round the fort. "They'd be sure to have cut it off."

"Is there any other way?" Piatte was thinking of the locket Brosset had given him. It was still in his tunic pocket and he put his hand there instinctively.

"Well, go on trying," Boucard was saying; "just use your brain and tell me if you find anything." He turned away, leaving the Corporal muttering to himself and saw Oursel coming through the gateway.

"Well, Sergeant?" He felt a terrible need to go on talking, but the difficulty was to find the words. He began to search in his pockets for his pipe.

"Nothing to report, sir." Oursel's eyes avoided him and went flickering round the fort.

"Get your troopers digging a grave," Boucard said shortly ; "deep enough for them all. And roll up all the boulders you can find to put on top. We'll make a cross of sorts, though those swine will pull it down soon enough." He was filled with bitter memories of desecrated graves. Soldiers who had been given Christian burial and then—a few months later—dug up and dismembered and the crosses used for firewood. When he raised his eyes, he could see the Duzair villages and the sight gave him savage pleasure. There could be only one hand behind this killing. He heard Oursel cough and became aware the Sergeant was still waiting.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Begging your pardon, Colonel. But you'll be bringing them to book for this?" Oursel jabbed a finger at the villages.

"That would please you?" Boucard asked.

"No, sir. It wouldn't please me. But it would be right."

Boucard nodded. He liked the Sergeant and their emotions at that moment were strangely akin : an eye for an eye ; unfettered by orders from authority ; the way vengeance should be taken.

"It's not my custom to let work like this go unpunished," he said, "but there's more to this than one thinks."

"You mean, Lieutenant Brosset may be a prisoner?"

"Partly that—and other things as well. It may take a little time. But I won't disappoint you, Sergeant."

"No, sir." Oursel stepped back. "I used to play chess with the Lieutenant," he said inconsequently. He saluted and walked quickly through the gates.

"Any luck, Corporal?" Boucard called. He was not anxious to walk once more through that carpet of buzzing flies, but forced himself, knowing he was paying a fraction of his debt to Brosset.

"Not yet, sir." The Corporal was still at work. "Why, that's Fournier!" He bent closer. "Poor fellow," he said indignantly. "Look, Colonel. I reckon what's left of this one is young Fournier. I've seen him washing many a time."

"Come on," Boucard said, "we haven't got all day." And because he was still consumed with guilt at having left

Brosset in this place he forced himself to stoop and help the Corporal.

When he came out he knew that Brosset was not inside the fort. He did not waste time wondering what had happened to the Lieutenant any more because now he had an exceedingly vivid picture in his mind.

Not far away he saw Piatte who was sitting on a rock. Something about the Captain's hunched shoulders disturbed him. He walked over and asked :

"You'll see to the burial service?"

"Yes, Colonel." Piatte looked up and Boucard recognised the signs. "It's the least we can do for them," he said, "before we go to look for Brosset."

"For Brosset!" Piatte's expression changed. He stood up suddenly, the lines around his mouth relaxing. "You mean——" His eyes pleaded with Boucard's.

"We can't find him," Boucard said shortly. "But that doesn't mean he is alive. It's a pity he should be such a brave man—since there's so little to tell."

"You said—we are going to look for him?" Piatte had been hating Boucard all this time.

"Soon enough," Boucard said quietly. "In a little while, Piatte. But there are things that must be done first." He had always liked Piatte.

"Thank God for that, Colonel. Sitting here and watching them——" Piatte gestured towards the troopers who were digging some distance away. "I would have had it on my conscience all my life."

"And mine," Boucard said quietly. "You don't imagine that you feel this any more than I, do you?"

"No, Colonel." Piatte looked up. He found it difficult to believe that Boucard was really moved and the polite reply came automatically. But as he looked at the heavy face, he began to experience a sensation of something shared. He was just about to speak when shots came flatly through the still air.

"Look—look there." Boucard was staring at a cloud of dust from which the noise of shouting came faint and indistinct.

D'Auberon rode up a few moments later, glancing back continually to where a tribesman was stumbling at the end of a rope. Bound tightly, he was at the mercy of a trooper who turned every now and then to give the rope a jerk so that the Arab fell flat on his face, clawing at the ground and bumping along until, with great agility, he managed to get upon his feet. Then he hopped painfully like a wounded bird, straining to keep close to the horseman ; fighting and clawing at the rope until it tightened suddenly and threw him on his face again.

"Excellent." Boucard's face had tightened.

"It's a Duzair," Piatte said, staring at the Colonel. A moment ago there had seemed a bond between them. Now Boucard's eyes were large and savage and the livid scar was twitching on his cheek. Piatte was afraid the heat and the experience in the fort had done something terrible to him.

"My first prisoner," d'Auberon said, beaming like a boy. "He was watching us from amongst the rocks. We put a bullet through his leg." He jumped down out of the saddle, too excited to notice Boucard's face. "Bring him along to the Colonel," he shouted in a laughing tone.

"Come along, you devil." The trooper jumped from his horse and pulled his sabre from its sheath. "Get moving," he said, jabbing the point into the Arab's leg. He drove him hobbling forward until he stood in front of the Colonel.

"You come at a good time," Boucard said in Arabic. His voice was thick and heavy and the words came only with an effort. "Why have you done this to my soldiers?" he asked. "Is it only your young men or is 'He' in the mountains?"

The Duzair raised his head and stared at the Colonel. He was a man in early middle age, tall and well developed and now, despite the blood and dirt, held himself erect without a hint of pain. He made no reply, his eyes dark and cruel, staring with burning hatred into Boucard's.

"So you are silent," Boucard said quietly. "Well, we have many ways of looking into a man's heart." He was impressed despite his rage. "Take him away," he said, "tie him up properly and don't let your eyes off him. They're worse than eels, these Duzair."

"Come on." The trooper jerked the rope, and the Duzair spun round. Boucard's last glimpse was of the hatred in his eyes, the teeth white and clenched beneath the curving nose, the brown skin, broken in patches where it had dragged along the ground.

"You've done well, d'Auberon," Boucard said, when the Arab was gone. "Bring me a few more tribesmen and you've earned a cross. I need their tongues more than anything else in the world just now. Eh, Piatte?" He seemed somehow to have recovered his good humour.

"Colonel?" Piatte was watching him closely. "What was that you asked the Duzair?"

"Just a few pleasantries," Boucard said quickly. "What did you think I said?" His face was suddenly cunning and Piatte found himself hating him again.

"I was thinking——" Despite himself, he was suddenly afraid of the Colonel.

"Then keep your thoughts to yourself." Boucard's voice was harsh. He watched Piatte closely, trying to guess whether he had any suspicion. "Well, Captain," he said irritably to d'Auberon who was staring at him in frank astonishment, "what's keeping you here. Haven't you anything to do?"

"But—yes." D'Auberon was taken aback; the pleasure slipped rapidly away. He looked from one face to the other and then remembered the fort. Not a word had been spoken. He felt a compelling urge to go and see for himself.

"No, no, my boy." Boucard had noticed the eyes flickering towards the walls. "You don't want to go in there," he said gently, unconscious that Piatte was looking at him again. "Never thrust yourself on something unpleasant until you are ready." He went on talking with his mind still inexorably on the Leopard, until he became suddenly aware of unusual noises from the direction of the well.

Beneath the mastick trees the troopers were beating the Duzair. They had left their mattocks and entrenching tools and run from the grave as soon as they had noticed him. Now they beat him savagely, with scabbards, sticks, and their hands. Even at that distance, Boucard could see the Arab twitching. Though he endeavoured to stand erect his body

was jerking, instinctively avoiding the crazy blows that rained down from the ring of infuriated soldiers.

"Stop that. I say stop." Boucard's voice seemed to paralyse the troopers. With hands still raised, they stared in his direction, the anger still vivid in their distorted faces.

"Go and stop them, Piatte," Boucard said more quietly. "Make certain that that never happens again. As soon as Hennessy comes, put him under a proper guard. I'd rather lose a trooper than that Duzair. And see those men get back to work."

He gazed at the Duzair with an expression whose passivity belied the thoughts inside his head. This was only the beginning. Audincourt would make the first moves. But Audincourt was still a child when dealing with fanatics. He sighed, but with a certain consciousness of satisfaction.

CHAPTER 12

AUDINCOURT walked down the passage and leant his head against the stonework. He was trying to think ; to master the panic lurking at the back of his brain.

Somewhere outside he could hear voices, where the men must be lighting the evening fires. He had a sudden vision of his companions sitting under the shade of the fig tree, savouring a languour that arose from an awareness of having escaped the sun ; a certainty of cool hours before the dawn began the familiar cycle once more.

But down here, there was no companionship. The prison was built into the base of one of the main walls. There was hardly any light ; only a dusty ray in daytime from a grating high up near the ceiling. At night, it was pitch black, and frighteningly silent with only the occasional noise to reassure the prisoners that they were not utterly forgotten.

Just now the Duzair tribesman was the only occupant. He had lain on the stone floor of the middle cell ever since Colonel Boucard had brought him back from El Oud. For twenty-four hours he had refused food or water, had declined even to open his mouth. Audincourt, who was still young enough to savour the keen edge of ambition, had begun simply ; the few ingenious tricks familiar to all intelligence officers. But once these had been contemptuously rejected, he had tried other methods ; nervous because this creature, endowed with an animal resilience, stared at him with such wounding contempt that he began to doubt himself, began to sweat and shout in a bombastic voice whose echoes filled the cell and distressed him because of the amused expression in Corporal Bastani's eye.

Bastani was in there now. The Corporal was forty, but had the olive complexion of a younger man. Audincourt had chosen him because he had served in the Police at Ajaccio. And Bastani had come willingly, for he had a natural cruelty which experience had taught him to refine so that it pleased

his superiors without revolting their feelings. He spoke good Arabic but few tribesmen saw him outside the fort.

But this time even Bastani was experiencing difficulty. Listening, with closed eyes, Audincourt could distinguish the sounds : the gasping breaths as though life itself were being dragged out at the end of a button hook, the convulsive rasping of chains, the heavy animal smell. Not for years had he encountered a man like this ; a stubborn determination that could not be snuffed out, but danced and wavered like an agonised candle flame.

He can't last much longer, Audincourt was thinking. In his experience courage was a quality which must exhaust itself after a certain time. And once the curtain was wrenched down, the raw surface would emerge ; requiring only a few more touches before the nerves tautened and snapped. In the last years he had had much time to observe the reactions of men under stress. He knew there were exceptions, especially here, in Africa, where æstheticism or indifference to pain gave many of his prisoners an initial advantage that must be slowly broken down. He removed his pince-nez and rubbed them softly against his tunic in the darkness.

When he returned, Bastani was sitting silently on a stool. The flame from a home-made candle stuck into the neck of a bottle, threw deep shadows on his face from where it flickered on the floor. The Corporal did not look up as Audincourt came in. His eyes were staring at the Arab's ; a snake-like stare that conveyed, worldlessly, the threat of an infinity of pain. But was yet ready to soften, to glow with sympathy, like a brother who comprehends the necessity of suffering, who sees it only as an inevitable preliminary accepted between both parties as a narrow bridge, towards a peaceful understanding.

But in this cell there was no reaching out for peace. The Duzair returned Bastani's gaze with an exhausted contempt that was terrifying because of the utter silence. He lay, half naked on the stone, his back propped against an angle of the wall where he had crawled out of a natural instinct to find respite from his companion. Again Audincourt experienced a sensation of uncertainty.

After another moment, Bastani turned away and looked at the Captain. His face was non-committal, the nose hawked and arrogant, giving him the appearance of a kestrel. He got up and motioned to Audincourt to follow, shutting the barred door behind him and locking it with a key which he produced from his trouser pocket. Only when they were at the far end of the passage, did he permit himself to speak.

"It's not easy," he said quietly. "He has so much determination and such physical strength." He seemed deep in thought, cogitating unusual methods through which such reserves might be broken down.

"How long do you think?" Audincourt found himself talking in a whisper, conscious of the smell that pursued them out into the corridor; hard and nauseating, a reminder that a powerful animal lay chained a few feet away.

"Perhaps a week," Bastani said.

"We can't wait that long." Again Audincourt experienced a sensation of panic. "We must have that information within another twenty-four hours. I tell you, he must be broken. It's got to be done."

Bastani nodded, but remained silent. His clean-shaven upper lip was drawn down; narrow and cruel. He appeared to brood, pondering on other obstinacies within his experience.

"I don't see it, Captain," he said at last. "I've had to deal with difficult men in my time, but this is outside my experience."

"He must break down soon." Audincourt tried hard to control his voice.

"Of course, Captain. But we have to find the key. And that takes time." The cold voice had an oily quality.

"I'm going in again," Audincourt said, desperately aware that if he failed this time, he must admit defeat.

"You'd like me there?" It was as if Bastani was experiencing a certain pleasure in his dilemma. But the cold voice went on, too identified with Audincourt's own fears to be derogatory. "Perhaps it would be best if we went together, Captain. Would you like me to get the brazier?"

"Yes," Audincourt said fiercely. "And get the instruments, Bastani." He talked rapidly to dispel his own fear.

"Very well, sir." The Corporal's tone was unperturbed. There were always men like Bastani, born with some twist that caused them to hunger for power expressed through the back alleyways, the secret, echoing passages. A power that never saw the sunlight. Like a mandrake plant, Audincourt thought, shivering with a strange excitement.

* * * * *

Boucard was standing on the parapet. He had been staring towards the mountains, pondering, his attention half diverted by the troopers who were playing cat and mouse near the drab brown tents behind the horse lines.

As he watched, Boucard was aware of the suppressed anger smouldering everywhere ; blatantly apparent in the savage way in which the troopers struck out at each other.

Piechut was the cat and Mignot the mouse. Blindfolded and armed with clubs, each was secured by a rope around one leg, anchored firmly to a peg. They were stalking each other, pausing to listen and thwacking out so that the clubs fell on each others backs, legs and buttocks or thudded harmlessly onto the ground.

Around them, a ring of troopers was shouting encouragement. Each heavy thwack was greeted by a yell of triumph. Their voices came crude and ugly through the warm air. And watching, Boucard saw again the men who had beaten the Duzair. Simple, uncomplicated men burning with the memory of El Oud ; working off their unspoken frustration in a brutal sport that, in its primitive way, satisfied their emotions.

All at once, Piechut caught Mignot a thunderous blow across the shoulders. And, as if the pain and the darkness of the encircling bandage were more than he could bear, Mignot tore the cloth from his eyes, looked wildly round and threw himself in outraged fury upon Piechut who, still crouched on all fours, was born helpless to the ground, flattened into the sand, pounded by Mignot's flailing arms and deafened by the roars of laughter that surged flatly towards the walls.

Boucard grunted and turned his back. He had come out

onto the parapet for quiet. He needed solitude and was weary of the sounds of the guitar on which Gounod accompanied his raucous singing. He was strumming in his room now—only a few yards away ; taciturn and unmoved. It had begun in Spain where Gounod had developed some strange affinity with the gypsies. And now it had followed them to Africa ; a horrible, stomach-moving cacophony that had acquired an extra keenness through familiarity with the Arabs.

Down below Boucard could see a group of officers seated, absorbed in some wrangle beneath the fig tree. He could guess their talk. Hennessy was waving his arms and ignoring Lebel who stood a little apart. The voices floated up, disembodied but all with a similar undercurrent which seemed to be reflected in the twinkling red fires which the soldiers had lit near the walls. Across the square, he could see Audincourt walking hesitatingly in his direction.

Audincourt came up the stairs, dragging one foot after another. He could hardly bring himself to salute the Colonel and stood, blinking through his pince-nez.

So plain were his emotions that Boucard could not find it in his heart to feel angry. He stood, looking at the Captain and permitted himself an acid smile. But Audincourt appeared so broken that it was left to him to speak first. His features were impassive as he said :

“ So it didn’t work, Captain ? ”

“ No, Colonel.” Audincourt shook his head. He risked one glance at Boucard’s face and hung his head like a boy caught cheating in class.

“ You got nothing out of him—nothing at all ? ”

“ Colonel ! ” Audincourt’s face was convulsed. His pale skin turned a dull red and then faded back to its normal colour. Looking at him, Boucard was aware that the man was suffering ; no mere disappointment but an agony of self-remorse. With an effort, he checked his disappointment and said :

“ I’ve no doubt you did everything possible. I rely on you, you know, Audincourt, and you knew just how important this was.”

"I couldn't go on. I hadn't got the strength." Once the initial words were past his lips, the rest came pouring like a torrent.

"I've been with him ever since you brought him here. Bastani and I, we've taken it in turns. I swear to you, Colonel, I've done everything—there's not a thing I haven't tried. But it doesn't work. It doesn't work," he repeated forlornly.

"Ha," Boucard said in his throat.

"It's his eyes, Colonel—staring at me. Just like an animal. I tell you it's like dealing with a creature made of iron. What we did to him—he seemed to glory in it. As though he welcomed the pain—even enjoyed it."

"I see," Boucard said quietly. "Well, don't distress yourself." He stood looking down at Audincourt and remembered the advice he had given him when they'd first had news of the Leopard. If Audincourt had listened, if he hadn't allowed his heart to dry up—this might never have happened. He'd have been softer, more pliable, less concerned with his own advancement, that personal preoccupation which had now snapped suddenly beneath the strain.

"I've failed you," Audincourt said suddenly. With this announcement, he felt calmer. The panic seemed to die away and he could almost bear to look at the Colonel.

"Yes—you have." Boucard's voice was curt and, all at once, Audincourt found himself seething with hatred. Locked away in the darkness he had been torturing himself along with the Duzair until something inside him had broken and he had come up here humiliated and ashamed. But Colonel Boucard didn't care about that at all. All he cared about was the Duzair—about that filthy tribesman. And if you broke yourself obeying his orders—what did that matter to him? It was Boucard who was to blame. Boucard—the thoughts went round and round in his tired brain.

"You have failed," Boucard was saying, "and I can guess what you must be thinking. I've told you before you were an ambitious man. Told you to watch yourself because one day something would disappoint you and you'd have to find an excuse—if you weren't big enough to acknowledge the real

cause. Well, you've found it now, Audincourt. You've found a peg on which you can hang your disillusion."

"Colonel, I don't follow you." Audincourt's rage gave his voice authority.

"You must hate me. Admit it, Audincourt. You don't like me very much just now, do you?"

Audincourt gulped.

"I expect an answer," Boucard said.

"Colonel——"

"At once," Boucard snapped, and as if the harsh voice had released an unexpected spring Audincourt pulled himself upright and said "No" in a loud voice. When it was out, he stared at the Colonel in consternation.

"Just as I thought. And now, you listen to me because I will give you some advice that you had better take if you expect to last out here. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Colonel." The voice was sullen.

"You imagine I'm hard. You think I don't know what you've been going through down there in the cells. But you knew just how important that information is. You knew how many lives depend on it."

Audincourt nodded.

"I must have that information, Audincourt."

"But, Colonel." Audincourt experienced a sudden realisation that, whatever happened, nothing would force him back into that cell.

"Now listen." Boucard was speaking more calmly. "You are exhausted, wrought up, you imagine yourself finished. But I'm going to show you that a trial of strength doesn't end with the first round."

"You are going to show me, Colonel?" Something in the determined voice checked Audincourt's rage.

"Yes, Audincourt. I'm going to show you. And don't imagine I don't know what you've been through. What do you think I learnt in Spain amidst a hostile population as savage as these Duzair?"

"Then you know, you know what it means?" Audincourt's fear had vanished with the realisation that the Colonel was about to lift responsibility from his shoulders.

"Yes, Captain. I know," Boucard said quietly. "But with the Leopard somewhere in the mountains, I'd tear that Duzair into pieces if I thought it would do any good."

"There's no other way," Audincourt said with returning confidence, feeling he could face the cells again, providing Boucard was with him.

"No, Audincourt. There's another means of destruction." Boucard was conscious what an effort it cost to support this boy, to give him back his confidence whilst all the time his mind was obsessed with the need to gain this knowledge.

"Go and fetch the Caid," he said suddenly. "Tell him, in my name, to come here immediately. And when you get back—don't go near the Duzair until I tell you. And then—only with me."

"As you say, Colonel." Audincourt was overjoyed to find that his confidence had returned. Thrusting the unpleasant memories behind, he said: "I know I've let you down, Colonel. But you can depend on me now."

"Good," Boucard said, thrusting out his hand and gripping Audincourt's. "You may have learnt something tonight. But we'll see, we'll see," he said, suddenly restless. "Now get off to the village and fetch the Caid."

CHAPTER 13

IT was over two hours before Boucard returned, slamming the door behind him so that Gounod, strumming on his guitar, put it down suddenly with a thoughtful expression.

A moment later the door was violently thrown open. Gounod rose swiftly to his feet.

"Gounod." Boucard's face had lost much of its colour and his hands were trembling.

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Go and fetch Commandant Zeller. Tell him I want to see him at once."

"Is there anything I can——" Gounod began.

"Don't stand there talking. But wait a moment. Have you any brandy?" He looked old and worn and Gounod nodded and hurried away. When he came back, Boucard had moved to a corner of the room and stood there his shoulders bowed.

"Anything else, Colonel?" Gounod said quietly.

"Yes, pour us both a glass."

Gounod did as he was told and only when the Colonel had the glass in his hand would he meet the steady eyes.

"How long have we been together, eh?" The voice was hoarse.

"Nearly forty years, sir."

"That's enough to judge a man's character?"

"Yes," Gounod said steadily.

"And it's not bad, what you know, eh? Patchy here and there, but on the whole not bad?"

"Colonel," Gounod said, "what are you trying to tell me?"

"Nothing," Boucard said hastily, looking away.

"I might have guessed. You've been working on that Arab. Anything like that's enough to upset you after that business in Oviedo."

"You remember that, eh?"

"I'm not likely to forget it. You should never have done a thing like that because it's right against your nature."

"You mean I haven't the courage?"

"I mean you don't have the heart. And besides it's never worth it in the end." Gounod's face had lost its calm. His eyes were narrowed, and his hooked nostrils seemed to stretch downward as though about to meet his mouth.

"What do you mean?" Boucard's voice was unsteady.

"That Spaniard, Colonel. You wouldn't let him alone until he died. And what good did it do? It was the right information, but it came too late."

"But this is different. You know——"

"It's not my place to know, Colonel Boucard. It's my work to look after you, which I've done without complaints for many years. And looking after you, means understanding you. Not just spitting on leather and polishing buttons. I can read you like a book, Colonel. It's no good you looking at me like that, because you know it's true. And now you've killed this Arab. You had no call to——"

"But I haven't killed him."

"You haven't?" Gounod looked genuinely surprised.

"It wasn't necessary. The only difficulty was letting that young fool Audincourt believe it was his own work."

"Then what are you so upset about?"

"I'm not upset. Stop staring at me like that."

"Then it's something worse," Gounod said gloomily.

"You'll overreach yourself again, like you did last time."

"Gounod!" Boucard lurched forward and seized him by the tunic. "What do you mean by that?" he shouted.

"Not so loud, Colonel. You wouldn't want your brandy if there wasn't something on your mind. I know you." Gounod stared quietly at Boucard until he dropped his arms to his sides.

"You are like my bad conscience, Gounod," Boucard said heavily.

"It's that Leopard. Now that's the truth, isn't it, Colonel? You've got that Arab in your blood worse than a fever."

"Gounod. You've got to believe me. This time I *know* I can catch him. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Gounod stared deep into the excited eyes and shrugged his shoulders. He knew that nothing he could say would move the Colonel and, in a way, was glad because this was how it had always been. In a slow, almost apologetic voice he said : "No, it doesn't mean anything to me. But I know that it means everything to you and that's why I've tried to understand. But after all, he's only human like you and me. He's got to die some day. Why don't you leave it at that, Colonel?"

"After what he has done to us ! You, of all people !"

"I'd be glad enough to see him dead. But with you, it's a passion you chase after all your waking hours. You've never been like this before. It's these last months that has brought it out. In some ways, it's as though you were getting queer."

"I'm queer, eh ? Then why don't you leave me ?"

"Because, queer or not, I couldn't. I've watched you too many years ever to get the feel of you out of my bones. You've been a good officer and more. So I'll stay on, doing my job if you have no objections."

"Oh, Gounod ! Why can't you see what I'm getting at ?" Boucard had an immense desire to convince his servant. If he could convince Gounod it would be like convincing himself.

"No, Colonel," Gounod said firmly, "I'll never see it your way. I can guess what's in your mind and I can see the tricks you'll get up to, arguing, persuading, lying when it's necessary ; anything that will get you started along the path you've set your mind on. Well—go ahead, Colonel Boucard. You've been a good friend to me. But I wish to God Madame had never died. Since she went you've had only your soldiers. And when you risk their necks because of an Arab——"

"Get out—get out," Boucard roared. He stood there, shaking with anger.

"At your orders, Colonel." Gounod bore himself with dignity. "I'll fetch the Commandant," he said, staring at the flushed face with sombre eyes but conscious of an affection he could never have put into words.

Boucard had recovered himself by the time that Zeller arrived. He glanced at Gounod, his eyes searching the man's

face. But Gounod went out and shut the door so that Boucard was left alone, tapping the table with nervous fingers, aware of Zeller's enquiring face.

"You wanted me, Colonel?" How many men there were like Zeller; good-hearted, methodical, accepting the exigencies of Army life with selfless resignation.

"Yes. I know where the Leopard is." Boucard spat out the news, still smarting from Gounod's words.

"Where!" Zeller's face seemed to change colour.

"On the Bakhir plateau. It's as I thought, the tribes are slow in coming to join him. He won't dare to move for some weeks."

"What are you going to do, Colonel?" Despite the tremor, Zeller's voice was calm.

"I'm leaving for Oran tomorrow. I'll see de la Motte and, by God, I'll wring something out of him. Once I've——"

"But, Colonel—he'll never give you permission to go after him."

"Wait a minute" Boucard said angrily, "you haven't heard what I propose to do. And remember—you haven't forgotten that promise I made you?" His eyes were searching Zeller's.

"No, Colonel, I haven't forgotten."

"Then listen. The Duzair will form the backbone of the Leopard's army. All the tribesmen must be with him now on the plateau. Their villages will be empty; only a few old men and the women and children. Now you know, Zeller, how much they dread a razzia. If we marched tomorrow and burnt their villages we could draw off the tribe from the Leopard. He'd never be able to keep them with him once they knew we'd taken their women and flocks. Within a matter of days, they'd be back in their own valley. You can guess the difference that would make to the Leopard?"

Zeller nodded but remained silent.

"Don't you see it?" Boucard went on: "A plan like that is common sense. It will appeal to de la Motte because it's bound to make work easier for his flying columns. Put yourself in his place. Wouldn't you agree to a suggestion like that?"

"Yes I would, but the General——"

"The General *must* be won over. Remember, I told you I wouldn't leave the fort without his permission. But if I do, it will be with more than a razzia in mind. You see what I'm driving at? Eh?" His head shot up like a fierce old eagle's.

"You'd use this razzia as an excuse to go after the Leopard?" Despite his doubts, Zeller was conscious of a growing excitement.

"Exactly."

"It's a terrible risk, Colonel."

"Of course it's a risk, but even if things should go wrong we can plead extenuating circumstances. You see we're covered both ways." Boucard's face was fierce with pleading.

"You sent that message? You told de la Motte about the Leopard?" Zeller still seemed doubtful.

"Of course, man, days ago. I've behaved perfectly. De la Motte can't possibly reproach me. But now I'm up against the hardest part of the whole scheme. Persuading de la Motte."

"I think you'll do that, Colonel." Zeller's mind seemed suddenly to have slipped into acquiescence. His doubts were gone, replaced by a confidence that half surprised him.

"It means something much larger than personal audition." Boucard's voice strengthened his conviction. "It's a chance that has been given us to do something really outstanding. If you seize a moment like this and exploit it, you make history. Nothing less," he cried, Gounod's gloomy face forgotten in the fierce experience of utter conviction.

"Pray God you are right, Colonel." Zeller too seemed uplifted with enthusiasm. "Just think what it would mean," he was almost shouting. "We should be the first, the first who have ever——" He could not go on, but stood staring at Boucard.

"Exactly." Boucard was like a friendly conspirator. "I knew you would see it the same way. Now not a word"—he became suddenly practical—"but get everything ready to move at once: ammunition, food, mules. And see about the field hospital."

"When will you be back from Oran, Colonel?"

"A week—ten days. I'll take Piatte and an escort and travel light."

"Colonel." Amidst the excitement, Zeller's brain retained its methodical precision.

"What is it?" For an instant, Boucard expected the Commandant to go back on him.

"The musical instruments. They have been waiting in Oran for weeks. Could you——" Zeller was puzzled by the relief in Boucard's face.

"Could I bring them back? What are you planning, a concert in the Duzair valley?" Boucard's laugh was loud and exaggerated.

"No," Zeller said, "I was not thinking of a concert. It's just that the bandsmen's instruments are practically worn out——" He was staring at the Colonel whose face was working in strange spasms of amusement.

"Very well," Boucard said at last, "we'll bring them back and you can arrange a concert the day we come down that valley with the Leopard. Now go and warn Piatte. No, no," he said, as though unable to stay still a moment, "I'll do it myself." He brushed past Zeller, and went hurrying out along the parapet.

* * * * *

Inside the mess hut, the atmosphere was so warm that Hennessy had taken off his tunic. He sat restlessly, his handsome face, flushed and sullen, glancing now and then at the familiar faces in the flickering candlelight.

They were all there, Delange, Crespin, Piatte, and d'Auberon. De Courcy was playing cards with Arnauld. In one corner, hunched on a biscuit box, was Audincourt, listening intently to the angry conversation. Like an outraged bird, he was glaring through his pince-nez.

"Don't say I didn't warn Brosset." His voice was shrill. "As if I didn't make it plain enough. We all knew something was likely to happen at El Oud."

"Oh, don't get so excited." Hennessy glanced up again, annoyed by the penetrating voice." He was weighed down

with depression, a black mood that had sat upon his shoulders ever since they returned from the fort.

"You ought to be more careful. You've insulted me." Audincourt was desperately on edge. After leaving Boucard, he had come back, desiring solitude and a darkness where he might hide until his nerves became steady. But instead here he was penned in the familiar atmosphere of tobacco smoke and stale food ; a prey to the unending voices, until the circle of faces ceased chattering and the servants were called in to unroll the hammocks.

"I have, eh?" Hennessy took another gulp of brandy and slammed down his glass. He looked up challengingly, eager for an incident that would break the monotony. But Audincourt seemed suddenly to have lost interest. With a brooding expression, he got up and walked towards the door. A current of air eddied the tobacco fumes as it swung behind him. Hennessy looked after him, disappointed.

"Mon cher"—Piatte had been watching silently—"why don't you and I take a little stroll?"

"Stroll?" Hennessy looked up. "That's all you can suggest, is it, Henri? A quiet stroll and a little philosophic chat. As if that will bring Brosset back. Ha!" He seized the bottle and filled his mug.

"Jean," de Courcy said, his long, elegant face crinkled with distaste, "suppose you tell us what you'd do?"

"What I'd do?" Hennessy's face was hard. "I'd march up the valley and burn their villages," he said.

"And that would save Brosset, I suppose?"

"Save him! At least it would show we are not rotting here. I can't understand it," he said; "sometimes I think the Colonel is out of his senses. I mean, this never used to happen, did it?" His words were beginning to slur and he had the familiar sensation of two persons struggling for supremacy. One was a cool detached being. The other, a morose, bitter creature who egged him on into disastrous fits of rage.

"It's past all reason," he said thickly. "Oh, it's insufferable." He rose suddenly to his feet, staring at their faces, each one of which appeared to mock him. Suddenly, near the

far end of the table, he caught sight of Lebel and his rage began to overflow.

"Here, you, Lebel," he shouted, feeling sudden power as the white, twisted face looked up.

"Lebel"—his voice was unnaturally loud—"what would you say? What would you do about poor Brosset? Like to go back up that valley and have it out with the tribesmen."

"I——" Lebel had half risen and stood staring in dismay. He knew Hennessy's moods and was terrified now their attention was centred upon himself. He tried to say something, but no words came and he stood there, staring helplessly, whilst his lips moved pathetically.

"Perhaps you don't want to do anything?" Hennessy's thick voice came crashing down on him.

"No," he said. He had meant to say "Yes," but the fatal word had come of its own volition.

"That's good!" Hennessy's voice had an edge of cruelty. "That's good!" he repeated, swaying on his feet. "I might have known it all the time."

"Be quiet, Jean." Piatte gripped his shoulder but was thrust aside.

"So that explains why you couldn't keep up with us," the thick voice whipped on. "I wondered what was keeping you all that time. You weren't in a hurry to go up there, Lebel, were you? Not if the Duzair might be around. You thought it might be easier to let Brosset stew in his own juice."

"No!" Lebel shouted fiercely and even Hennessy was able to hear him. "That's not true." He stood there, holding to the table for support. All round him savage faces seemed to glare with unanimous disapproval.

"You liar." Hennessy was now past caring. The idea of Lebel opening his mouth to reply was too grotesque to be endured. He experienced a sudden flowering of hatred, that carried him above the spluttering candlelight and startled faces.

"You abominable little coward," he was unconscious that he was shouting. "It makes me ill to sit in the same place with you, to eat the same food, to share the same uniform."

It's a pity you weren't in El Oud with Brosset—instead of defiling our mess with your revolting face."

"You say that, Captain Hennessy?" In the appalled silence that followed, Lebel's voice was heard by everyone. He was conscious that he held their attention and though his body was quivering, he knew inevitably there was no going back.

"I did." That was Hennessy's voice. "Do you fail to agree with me?" Its arrogance gave Lebel a final despair.

"You'll give me satisfaction," he said in an unnatural voice.

"Satisfaction." Hennessy laughed loudly. "With pleasure, my dear Lieutenant."

"Captain Hennessy." A booming voice caught him unawares. Looking up, he saw the Colonel in the open doorway. "Very entertaining," Boucard said, aware that every head had turned in his direction. Only Lebel seemed unaware of his presence.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you disappoint me. You could find better things to do. This sort of thing reminds me of the days when I was besieged in El Marach. There was a Sergeant there—a German in the Legion. He was in charge of the soldier's mess and kept pigs and sheep in a corner of the fort. One morning I was walking past and heard him talking to the pigs. Not the way a farmer does—by God no. He was arguing with them just like a brother. I said to him: 'In God's name, Sergeant, what do you think you are doing?'—'Doing, Colonel?' he said. 'I am preaching to my flock!'—'Preaching!' I said. I was at a loss for words. So I went for a chat with the surgeon; a real sawbones—lived on brandy. 'What's all this?' he said when I'd told him what I'd heard. 'You mean to say you are disturbed, Colonel. Give it no more thought!'—'What!' I said. 'You advise me to forget it!' And you know what he said? '*Soyez tranquille, mon Colonel,*' he says; 'the time to worry is when the pigs start talking back!'"

In the uneasy silence that followed, Boucard was aware of the faces staring at him—like self-conscious ghosts caught in the candlelight.

“ Hennessy,” he said slowly, “ perhaps you need a change. Take two troopers and ride up to El Oud tomorrow. And I don’t want to see you back here until I send for you. Understand, eh ?” His expression was severe, not a hint of the surprise still to come.

“ Piatte,” he rapped out suddenly. “ You’ll come to Oran with me tomorrow. Bring a Sergeant, ten men and a couple of mules. Six o’clock tomorrow. Eh ?” He sensed the sudden interest, felt the immediate change in the atmosphere. He turned quickly and walked outside into the shadows.

D'AUBERON stood uneasily beneath the fig tree. It was very quiet, only an occasional murmur of voices inside the fort and the dull footsteps of the sentries. Overhead, the moon hung heavy in a great waste of darkness. Like a luscious, cream-coloured fruit, it overflowed with light, pouring a pale radiance over the stonework and casting long, elegant shadows across the ground.

"Henri," d'Auberon said at last, "what did the Colonel say that upset you?" He was almost nervous of his companion who leant silently against the twisted trunk. Inside the hut, the others would be comfortably asleep, uniforms heaped untidily upon biscuit boxes in a manner that was familiar and comforting. He glanced again at Piatte who appeared to have forgotten him.

"Are you all right, Henri," he said uneasily.

"Yes," Piatte said quietly, "I'm perfectly all right." He was longing to unburden himself, but not to d'Auberon whom experience had not yet overtaken sufficiently. One day it would change him; imperceptibly so that he would take it for granted in the effortless acceptance that was a part of soldiering in Africa. But just now, watching him in the mess, Piatte had known d'Auberon approved Hennessy's taunts, had instinctively taken his part like a child who must always mock at something ugly since it points a challenge to its own security.

No—d'Auberon was not the man. Let him soldier in this country a little longer; let him endure privation, and grow to understand his soldiers who shared it uncomplainingly in return for a little understanding and fourpence pay a day. A few years longer and he would complete his noviciate, would pass through this university where peasants and gentlemen learnt the same values. But until that day, that moment when nothing surprised . . . He sighed softly and eased his back against the tree.

"Go to bed, my dear chap," he said, "I'm bad company

tonight and I'll stay here awhile until I'm myself again." He smiled at d'Auberon who stood hesitating, appreciating the young man's obvious desire to help. "Go on," he said quietly.

"Very well, Henri." D'Auberon shifted from one foot to the other. He sensed a sadness, a despondency in Piatte and would have liked to say something. But the face in the shadows was unresponsive, the eyes dark with some emotion beyond his comprehension. He lifted his hand to place it on Piatte's shoulder, hesitated, and let it drop to his side again. "Good night, Henri," he said, and began to walk swiftly across the square.

When he had gone, Piatte climbed the steps leading to his favourite stretch of parapet. Facing the sea, it was unguarded, untroubled by the stamp of boots or the clash of musket butts. But when he reached the parapet, he was annoyed to see someone already there; a silent hunched figure which the moonlight revealed as Lebel.

"I'm sorry." Lebel started back surprised. "I didn't realise that you—that you—" His voice trailed away and Piatte's anger melted in a sudden compassion.

"Don't disturb yourself," he said quietly. "I only came up to watch the water in the moonlight." He came up beside Lebel and leant on the parapet, looking out over the sea. He was glad now that Lebel was here and listened almost with content to the nervous voice that went stammering on like a child's.

"I do wish he had not come in," Lebel was saying. He was aware that Piatte regarded him sympathetically. Alone amidst the others in the fort, this man had never looked at him with distaste. "Until Colonel Boucard came into the room I really believed, I really thought——"

"That you might prove yourself to yourself?" Piatte said.

"Why yes! That's just what I did think. I've never been in a position before—I mean—where I had no alternative but to stand up for myself. But there was nothing else to do. And I did it, I did it," he said excitedly, "until the Colonel came and then it was all no use."

"It wasn't wasted," Piatte said slowly; "no experience

like that is wasted. You've grown older, grown to know yourself more intimately—that's all."

"But I didn't go through with it! I only made the gesture. If he hadn't come I'd have had to really prove myself. And then I'd have known."

"But was it so easy?" Piatte was regarding him intently. "Was it easy to stand up and challenge a first-rate shot like Hennessy?" His quiet voice went probing deep inside the unhappy Lieutenant who recognised its strength and looked up with appealing eyes.

"No." His voice was little more than a sigh.

"What is it, Lebel? What's got inside you so that you no longer trust yourself?"

"Piatte"—the desperate voice disturbed and echoed his own fear—"don't you understand? I'm frightened. I'm a coward. Now do you see what I mean?"

"Yes," Piatte said, "I see what you mean."

"I've never talked to anyone about it before. It's been inside me, bottled up all the time."

"Would you like to talk to me?"

"Yes," Lebel said, "if you don't mind." His breathing was irregular and loud.

"Then go ahead—and I will listen."

"You don't know what it means to have someone to talk to—everyone else is so disapproving, so self-contained that I daren't even begin. But it started when I was a boy. My lip—you see. Until I went to school I never realised. I suppose my parents were determined to make me feel normal—like other children." He laughed bitterly.

"You know how cruel children are, needlessly cruel without realising why or what they are doing to you. I'd never been conscious of my face until they pointed it out to me. But then I knew. I was different. I offended other children. And yet how much I wanted to belong.

"But they wouldn't even let me play with them! It sounds childish, doesn't it, Piatte, but it's really just the same in this fort. For years I had to live with it, try when I was alone to pretend that it didn't exist. Do you know, I even hung a towel over the mirror in my bedroom? I didn't want

to be reminded because, when I was alone, I could dream I was like other children. One day, my mother took it down and I remember coming home and bursting into tears. She tried to comfort me. She understood very well what was in my head. But by then this dreadful lip had come between us so that I hated her. I don't need to say much more to make you realise what an unhappy little boy I was."

"Go on," Piatte said. He was beginning to lose himself in Lebel's story, to feel a growing sympathy for the desolate, uncouth figure beside him.

"One day I saw the soldiers. They were marching through the streets, home from the fighting in Spain. We children ran out from our playground to cheer them; long lines of sunburnt men with muskets on their shoulders going tramping past.

"Everybody seemed proud. Women were waving handkerchiefs, old men raised their hats to the flag. The children round me waved and cheered. They had forgotten about me. A little boy standing and watching the faces going past; strong faces, burnt almost black from the sun under broken old shakos with brass chin-straps that glittered just like gold.

"One of the Sergeants was a big man. A fine-looking chap until you saw his face. There was a scar, a great purple scar that lifted the corner of his mouth and ran right up to his ear.

"Immediately, I was drawn towards him. I felt that he and I were like the same person. I couldn't bear to have him out of my sight and ran along beside the column until he noticed me and looked down and smiled. Yes—he smiled and I was radiantly happy. I trotted along near his side until we reached the outskirts of the town. And then, because I knew I should be in trouble at school, I stood, looking after the soldiers as they marched away up the hill. When they were almost out of sight, I found I was crying. I must have been crying all the time. But they weren't tears of sadness. I'd realised that you could belong after all.

"Do you understand, Piatte? It must sound like a fairy-tale. But, I can still feel it now. No-one had laughed at that soldier. No-one had called him names. I knew then that

there was a place for me too. That the names the children called me didn't matter any more because now I had something to which I could look forward.

"When I told my father that I must be a soldier, he didn't try to dissuade me. I think he understood and it was only some years later that he began to warn me. But by then my resolve had hardened. I wanted to wear a uniform; a shako with a brass chin-strap under which my lip would look like a wound. My God, what an obsession it was—that longing to be accepted. You can't understand until you are different how important it is to conform.

"But I forgot one thing—one has to give as well as take. And the Army demands vital qualities, demands them in full measure. In my excitement, I had forgotten how timid I was. Or rather I'd pushed that knowledge aside, in my anxiety to achieve what I wanted. I worked hard and was noticed by my teachers. I was proud of my uniform, because people looked at me in a new way and none of the cadets called me names—mainly because we worked too hard.

"I remember the week before our final examinations. My father tried to dissuade me then. He was a kind man and knew his own limitations. He wanted me to give up the Army and be a lawyer. 'It won't suit your temperament,' he kept saying in his quiet voice; 'in this family our nerves are like the strings of violins: too much strain and they snap suddenly—just that extra tightening and they are broken, beyond repair.'

"Of course—I didn't believe him. I couldn't even allow myself to listen. And I passed top out of all my class. Oh yes, I've brains enough.

"And do you know, Piatte, that when they sent me to Fontainebleau I was happy. Really happy, perhaps for the first time in my life. It was so quiet there, so peaceful; a small mess where we weren't always on top of each other. It was all so civilised, so natural. The other officers accepted me without question, an occasional good-natured joke, you understand, but nothing else.

"My God—how I look back to those days; picnics in the forest, autumn manoeuvres, sitting in the mess on summer

evenings and watching the dusk creep in amongst the trees. For the first time I really began to live, began to trust my companions. Even the men appeared to like me ; I was odd, perhaps, but I got along.

"And on top of it all, I fell in love. Of course it never came to anything, but imagine, it could actually happen to me. Sometimes I used to say to myself—this is too good, it can't be true. But the days went on with nothing to disturb them. Sometimes, at night now, when I can't sleep, I try to relive them. But I can never catch the atmosphere, never quite recapture——" He broke off and stood, biting his nails and staring out to sea.

"How did you come here?" Piatte asked. Watching Lebel, he was beginning to feel him beyond his help.

"~~It~~ was posted," Lebel said bitterly and Piatte knew that his instinct had been right. "Some swine in an office must have picked my name at random. They needed reinforcements.

"Well, I came here. But not without protest. I knew how much that life meant to me and I wasn't ready to give it up that easily. Believe me, I pulled every string I could. But it was useless, useless," he said pettishly.

"But didn't you try to settle down in Africa? You knew you'd be here for some years. Surely you could have made the best of it?" Piatte stared at him curiously. How odd, he thought. He could remember his own relief arriving in Africa; the great remote mountains, the red earth that seemed to have sucked in some element of the sun. It was all clean and hard, a harsh, demanding country that exerted its influence immediately. Within ten days, he had been in action in the mountains, he found himself welcoming the hardship, infinitely grateful that he was once again serving a cause that had room for him.

"Made the best of it?" Lebel said shrilly. "Why, ever since I came here I've dreamt of getting back to France again. But now I sometimes wonder if it's not too late."

"What do you mean?" Piatte asked, thinking how loath he would be to be recalled from Africa. The fort here—what a refuge it had seemed. It almost reminded him; the bare

stone floors, the echoing walls. He shrugged his shoulders, tortured with the swift memory that tomorrow he must leave for Oran.

"I've changed," Lebel said quietly. His face had lost its childish petulance and had become old and drawn. "I could never go back to Fontainebleau and know the same happiness. It just is not in me any more. It's been destroyed along with all my other illusions."

"What illusions?" Despite the picture of the street in Oran, Piatte found room to pity Lebel. This man was afraid, afraid of admitting his fear. Yet all that stood between him and the peace he prattled about was a set of papers. Whereas no papers on earth would ever quiet Piatte's conscience.

"I can't give them up," Lebel said stubbornly. "If I do that I'm finished and I'd have nothing left."

"But listen. Hundreds of other men are not made to be soldiers. It's nothing to be ashamed of; just a part of your character that won't fit in."

"Oh, it's easy to talk," Lebel said bitterly; "of course I know I should have sent in my papers within a month of coming here. But at first I thought perhaps I'd be able to crush my feelings. I allowed myself to think that because I wanted to go on belonging."

"You know, the first time I really knew it was no use was two years ago. My company was sent to search for a patrol. We found them easily enough but they'd all been ambushed. Just like El Oud," he said jerkily. "Hennessy was quite right. I never wanted to go near that fort."

"It horrified you?" Piatte said gently. He had almost forgotten his own preoccupation.

"It shattered me. Of course I should have known what to expect. I tried to tell myself from the beginning. But when I actually saw the bodies——" His harelip was moving strangely and Piatte looked away.

"Since then I've always been afraid," he went on after a long silence. "It's like a seed, growing inside me, putting out fresh shoots until it's twined itself round my soul. It's part of me now, Piatte, something that will never leave me. And

the others sense it." His voice was bitter. "I can feel them watching me, wondering how much longer I can last."

"It's not like that," Piatte said.

"No? How good if you were right. But cooped up in this fort it's become a sport. I expect they make bets: ten francs on the day Lebel cracks up." In a frenzy of despair, he was clutching at the parapet.

"You are mistaken," Piatte said; "a few men may be made like that."

"You perhaps?" Lebel turned on him suddenly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I've told you a lot tonight. How do I know it won't be round the fort tomorrow?"

"You really believe that?" Piatte said slowly, staring at Lebel so powerfully that the over-wrought eyes blinked painfully and Lebel said in a choking voice:

"Forgive me. I didn't know what I was saying."

"Forget it," Piatte said. He knew that there was little now that he could say to comfort Lebel. For a moment, he had imagined himself describing his own fears in an effort to explain that no man could entirely escape; that every soldier in Sagun was haunted by some private fear.

"That business tonight," Lebel had begun again. "At last I thought I'd overcome this thing. But then Colonel Boucard came in and it all fell to pieces in my hands. And now I'm back exactly where I started." His voice went on, pathetic and complaining.

CHAPTER 15

COLONEL BOUCARD paced slowly up and down the anteroom. From time to time, he paused and peered out through the window at the glittering sea below. But he was hardly aware of the steep brown cliffs that rose abruptly from the water, unconcerned with the jumble of white buildings that jostled for space, nor the heavy heat haze that hung above the town.

Behind the closed door, he could hear voices, a steady drone that filled him with a special grievance. Somewhere inside, de la Motte was purposely keeping him waiting. He kicked irritably at the matting which covered the floor.

"The General will see you now, Colonel." A young staff officer came through the doorway which was suddenly open. Boucard drew himself up and followed the young man. Inside, he saw de la Motte seated at his desk and saluted meticulously.

"Ah, good afternoon, Colonel Boucard." The General did not get up, but remained seated, smiling affably.

"And what brings you to Oran, eh?" The words came swift and enquiring. But Boucard managed to smile.

"I have something to discuss with you, General," he said quietly.

"Well, sit down, sit down." De la Motte waved impatiently at an empty chair.

"Thank you, General." Boucard hitched up his sword and seated himself carefully, knowing the cold grey eyes were observing him from beneath hooded lids.

"Has El Oud been raided again? That was a pity, Colonel, a great pity." De la Motte's face was long and melancholy. Like a scavenger bird's, Boucard thought.

"No, General," he said carefully, trying to choose his words.

"Then why are you here? Is there anything wrong with the telegraph?" The words were rapped out, like spent bullets falling into a pool.

"The telegraph?" Boucard was taken off his guard. "No, it's all right," he said quickly.

"Then why didn't you send me a message? That's why

the telegraph was installed. You've wasted days riding down here. Do you take my point?"

"Yes," Boucard said, conscious of mounting anger.

"Well, what is it, Boucard?" De la Motte had tried to like the Colonel, but it was a thankless task. He sat back, placidly, wondering what new trouble the Colonel was brewing. But Boucard's next sentence brought him suddenly alert.

"I want permission to make a razzia, General."

"A razzia?" The General let the syllables escape one by one through his teeth. "Do you indeed?" he said to gain time.

"Yes, General. And I don't think the results will disappoint you."

"Really, Colonel?" De la Motte's voice held a note of sarcasm. "Perhaps you've forgotten——"

"General," Boucard said, humbling his voice, "I know that you don't trust me after the Kashani valley. Perhaps you never have. But please believe I've learnt my lesson."

"I'm delighted to hear it, Colonel."

"I've made mistakes, General. Of course I have. But each of us is liable to some error of judgement."

"Go on." De la Motte leant forward, his long chin resting in his hand. He seemed to study Boucard with special interest, as if weighing and measuring each word with the utmost care.

"You sent me to Sagun," Boucard said simply. "I've had twelve months to think things over. You'd admit, General, my conduct has given you no cause for regret?" He glanced cautiously at the thin face.

"I must say your tour of duty at Sagun has been highly creditable. Indeed, I've sometimes been surprised that you were able to restrain yourself from taking a more active rôle." His voice sounded coldly amused and Boucard bowed his head, constraining himself to silence.

"Well, Colonel"—de la Motte leant back suddenly—"and now you've grown tired and have ridden in here with a scheme. What is it this time? Do you want to go after the Leopard again? That was excellent intelligence you sent me. I congratulate you."

"General——" For an instant Boucard longed to outline his real plan, but de la Motte's eyes were sufficient.

"No," he said, "I'm leaving all that to you now. You've introduced new tactics that I admit I don't entirely comprehend. I know you think I'm old-fashioned, that I'm out of date and would be better in some lodging house in France. But I accept that, General. It's the penalty for growing old."

"But, Colonel Boucard!" Despite his reserve, de la Motte seemed genuinely concerned. "You must not feel that," he said quietly, "your experience is of great value. Of great value," he repeated, tapping his fingers on the table.

"No, General." Boucard let his head droop down to conceal his face. It was working. By God it was working.

"Now listen, Colonel." For a moment the General seemed almost human. "We've never spoken frankly together, have we? I'm not as young as I used to be myself."

"You are a younger man than I, General."

"True, Boucard, and I'll admit quite frankly that I believe it is time you retired. But that doesn't mean I don't appreciate you—quite the reverse.

"I sent you to Sagun purposely. You'd wrecked my plans—imposing your own judgement at the wrong time. Had you been any other man, there would have been only one alternative. You appreciate what I mean?"

Boucard nodded silently.

"And I must admit, Colonel, that I hoped after a few months in Sagun, you'd decide to send in your papers. There are younger men——" The General paused and then went off at a different tangent. "But, of course, with the Leopard back again an entirely new situation arises. We need every experienced soldier—especially men with your own knowledge. There's a place for you, Boucard, providing you are prepared to obey orders. But on no other conditions, absolutely none. You understand?"

"I understand, General." Despite his caution, Boucard was roused.

"Don't look so eager, Colonel," de la Motte said drily. "I'm not going to give you command of a flying column. You'll stay in Sagun, but I'm prepared to listen to your proposition—because I appreciate you are no fool when it comes to a question of risking men's lives."

"May I explain my ideas," Boucard began. It was exactly as he had imagined. A reprieve because every man was needed now the Leopard had come across the frontier. He wondered suddenly if de la Motte was capable of guessing the plans simmering in his brain. But the man was eaten up with his own importahce and Boucard was conscious of no sense of guilt as he began to expound his plan.

"You can appreciate how decisive a raid on the Duzair valley would be, General. They'll be with the Leopard now and you know how he depends on them. But once their villages are in flames, once their women——" His heavy voice went on, slow and cautious, whilst de la Motte listened attentively, nodding his head occasionally in silent agreement.

"How many men have you in Sagun?" His sharp voice cut through Boucard's concluding words.

"Nearly three hundred and fifty." Boucard felt a physical stab of excitement.

"You would have to leave a hundred in the fort," the General said reflectively, "perhaps a few less. I sent a flying column through the mountains two days ago. But it will take time to find the Leopard. And meantime—I won't risk Sagun being left undefended."

"The whole operation could be completed in ten days," Boucard said quickly.

"Yes," de la Motte said pensively, "in ten days, provided all goes well."

"I can guarantee it," Boucard said with utter conviction.

"No doubt you can." De la Motte's voice was hard.

"But can I be certain you won't overstep your authority?" His eyes prised coldly into Boucard's, keen and enquiring so that the little tremors came back again and nestled in his stomach.

"General," Boucard said simply, convinced by his own sincerity, "I give you my word. If I fail you, I shall be dead—in the Duzair valley."

"And beyond recall?" De la Motte smiled mirthlessly.

"Somehow I feel that rôle would not be unsuitable to your temperament. Oh, don't look so pained, Colonel. I didn't learn my trade with the Corsican, but one rubs along, one rubs along," he repeated with an ill-veiled sarcasm.

"The decision is in your hands," Boucard said quietly. The gibe had left him unmoved, because now he knew the moment had come. He watched de la Motte with an expression devoid of all feeling, praying silently in a crude and unfamiliar fashion.

"In my hands," the General repeated. "Very well—I give you permission. But one kilometre beyond those Duzair villages! One kilometre—you understand?" His voice was still cold and Boucard nodded silently, recognising his prayer had been understood. For a long moment he could not bring himself to speak. But when he did, it was in a steady, confident voice.

* * * * *

Propped up against the bales behind a counter, Mignot and Piechut were enjoying a bottle of brandy with the storeman, an obese fellow who shook with laughter so that drops of perspiration stood out upon his forehead. It was with great reluctance that Mignot rose to see to the mules. That devil Angelo to whom he was becoming quite attached, was braying his head off somewhere outside the store. He cast a look round at the bulky packages which were piled upon the counter and hitched up his belt. Drums, cymbals, what a pile of junk to carry back. He spat vigorously and walked outside into the sunlight. It was then that he noticed Colonel Boucard hurrying down the hill.

"Hallo there, Mignot." Boucard appeared unaware of the heat. His heavy face was smiling so that Mignot, springing to attention, began to speculate whence he might have come.

"Loading the mules, eh, Mignot?" Boucard's voice was positively jovial.

"Yes, sir." Mignot's stolid answer concealed his fears for Piechut busy inside with the bottle.

"Well, go and find Captain Piatte. Tell him that we'll start as soon as the sun goes down. I shall be in the headquarters mess if he should want me. Otherwise I'll meet him at the cross-roads as we agreed. Got that?"

"Yes, Colonel." Mignot's voice was mournful.

"You hoped we might have stayed another day, eh?"

"Oh *no*, sir."

"As if I can't smell your breath! Now get moving." Boucard stared after him as the trooper hurried, bandy legged, down the steep road.

"Well, Mignot," Oursel said resignedly when the trooper had delivered his news, "you needn't have hurried. Couldn't you have lost your way?" He looked regretfully at the chessboard aware that his opponents eyes were still inexorably concentrated on the pieces.

"No, Sergeant." Mignot looked curiously round. Funny lot of Arabs, he thought, dozing over their coffee in this fly-blown café. Oursel was the only Frenchman. It must be that chess. He looked curiously at the board. "Were you winning, Sergeant?" he asked.

"No," Oursel sighed "no, I wasn't winning." He stood up and bowed politely to the Arab, excusing himself in his few words of Arabic so that the man nodded courteously and swept the pieces from the board with a regretful gesture.

"All right, Mignot. Go and warn the others and I'll fetch the Captain." Oursel was thinking what a wonderful game it was. No difficulties about language. A chessboard was international. Once you'd sat down and nodded to your opponent and set out the pieces there was no need for words.

"He's in a good temper," Mignot said. "Haven't seen him in such high spirits, not for a long time."

"High spirits?"

"Yes,"—Mignot rolled his eyes—"old Boucard came running in on me and Picchut."

"Who!"

"Old—Colonel Boucard, Sergeant."

"That's enough. Get back to the troop. Get the horses saddled up and don't forget those mules."

"No, Sergeant." Mignot followed Oursel sadly out of the café. Wouldn't mind one of them, he thought, fingering the bead curtain. He stood in the hot sunlight watching the Sergeant walking away down the street. He'd be going to fetch Captain Piatte. It was funny how it took them, but the Captain was queer anyway. He stared regretfully after Oursel who was vanishing down a side street.

BOUCARD threw a handful of sticks on the fire and pulled his cloak tightly round his throat. Dawn was still hours away and an immense silence had settled over the plain. Only the sticks burnt with a faint crackling, casting queer shadows on the sleeping forms ; Gounod like a dead man, wrapped in his blanket, and Mignot and Piechut like brothers, snuggled close in search of warmth.

Nearby the tethered horses stirred restlessly. He listened and was reassured by the soft padding of the sentries' boots. A black tumult of cloud was passing across the moon. And Boucard shivered, restless because his mind would not allow him to sleep.

Oddly, he had been thinking of his wife. Why, he could not imagine for he had not seen her for thirty years. She had been ill already when he had left for Belgium and during the endless marching across soggy fields and then the confused flight after the battle, he had had no time to remember her. It was not until the remnants of his regiment were back over the French frontier that he heard she was dead and the two girls sent to her brother in Lyons.

He sighed. How much it meant to have a home—even if one only saw it occasionally during long intervals of campaigning. But now there was only Gounod and himself, two old men who clung to each other through long association and a mutual fear of loneliness.

One day, he would be forced to settle in France. Gounod was already anticipating his rôle as cook and housekeeper. Boucard shuddered. He could imagine the little box where his medals would hang, framed behind glass. It was ugly growing old, with nothing to which he could cling but a succession of scenes that had gone past and that had become, against his will, history.

God—he was dozing. But he couldn't sleep—not with these fantasies nagging in his brain. As soon as the sun rose, it would be different. His body was cold, at its lowest ebb. The sun would warm him, give him back his strength. With

the daylight, the certainty would come flooding back. The certainty that there would be no enforced retirement, no mouldering in some obscure town. He saw the bands, crashing out a brassy triumph, the incredulous faces ; de la Motte—he laughed deep in his throat and turning, saw that Piatte was still awake.

“Captain,” he called softly and watched Piatte get up and come hesitatingly towards him. He knew he owed the Chasseur some apology, must bind him to himself with some confidence that would restore his own spirits.

“Look here,” he said when Piatte was seated beside him, “I’m sorry I had to bring you to Oran.”

“It’s of no importance, Colonel.”

“No? Don’t tell me it’s meant nothing to you. I remember your face the night I told you. But I needed you, Piatte. I wouldn’t have brought you otherwise.” He was very curious about the emotions that must be churning inside Piatte. This business of sin, disturbed, yet fascinated Boucard. If Piatte had sinned in the manner in which he had just done with de la Motte, there would have been real reason for those strangely dead features.

“It’s duty, Colonel. Let’s leave it at that.” Piatte’s voice was dry, wrung out reluctantly.

“As you like,” Boucard said. He waited, confident that Piatte must go on.

“Colonel Boucard?” Ah, there it was. “You know about me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Boucard said.

“How did you first find out?”

“Your face,” Boucard said, “your habits, the way you dedicate yourself to your squadron. You’ve been the only happy man in the fort, Captain.”

“I thought it might have been—because you found me reading the burial service. You remember, that day when one of the troopers died of fever.”

“No,” Boucard said, “I knew before. I think I knew the first day you came. I’ve met unfrocked priests before, Piatte. Don’t forget I was campaigning before you were conceived. And in the old days, it wasn’t so unusual.”

“ No ? ”

“ I’ve admired them. I knew two and each was a man who bore a double burden.”

“ You recognised that, Colonel ? ” Piatte leant forward, his voice hoarse.

“ They were like men flying from their own shadows. An impossibility because the shadow must always catch up. You know that, don’t you, Piatte, that you’ll never escape ; that the church is always within you ; that your conscience pursues you even whilst you sleep ; that it will go after you even into eternity, eh ? ”

“ You know all this and yet you’ve never spoken before ? ”

“ Why should I ? There’s a time for everything. I’ve watched you, fitting into a soldier’s life as though you were snuggling back inside a cassock. I knew you felt Sæun a monastery, a refuge, whilst to me it was a prison. I’ve thought about you often, Piatte, because in some ways we think alike. And I want you to know that however badly it may torment you—you are not alone.”

“ No ? ” Piatte said doubtfully, feeling older than the Colonel.

“ Look, Piatte—in men’s minds your sin is very trivial. It doesn’t ever make sense, because in the old church, before the Popes clamped down their authority, priests were allowed to marry. It’s common sense—look at the holy men out here. They’ll ask you, how can a man’s mind concern itself with holy things if his body is tormented by the lusts of the flesh ? And so they take wives—to ensure a pure and tranquil mind. Don’t look as though I’m blaspheming, Captain. I’m just telling you the truth.”

“ It can make no difference,” Piatte said. “ I have committed this sin and broken my vows. And there is no hope, because I would do it again. Can’t you understand, Colonel. There’s no escape and no way of atonement. You can guess why I’m like this tonight. I’ve been to Oran. And wherever I go, there’ll always be an Oran.”

“ I hate the church,” Boucard said. “ When I die bring me its rites because it’s in my bones and I must have them. But as a man, I say I hate it. It’s an unfair handicap to come

into a Catholic world. Your feet are tied before you begin to walk. They put something inside your brain and—so—it works on like a clock. Look at you. You can't stay here for ever serving in Africa. What happens to you after that?"

"I might ask you the same question, Colonel. What happens to you when you cease to soldier?"

"Ah—you've got me there and I was trying to help you. Confound it, Piatte, don't you *want* to feel better?"

"There's no question of that. I could no more expect the freedom you talk about than touch this sand and bring out water. But I keep on trying because that's human nature and I can't escape that either. It's like living in a dream; sometimes one really feels one might wake up. But no, it's not possible."

"What do you feel?" Boucard asked, strangely drawn towards his companion. "Is it humiliation or guilt?"

"Both," Piatte said, "but because I'm unforgivably proud, in my heart I know it to be humiliation."

"That's better," Boucard said, "because now we can talk as equals. I've been humiliated in my time, had my face ground down until I was grovelling in dust."

"Not that kind——" Piatte began.

"Wait a moment, I was coming to that. Nothing can humiliate one so much as one's own notions, one's thoughts. It goes deep, deep." He paused, shivering. "I've never admitted this to anyone but myself. You've probably heard men tell you how I ate dirt after the Restoration. But no-one really knows except me, no one feels it here." He tapped his heart.

"But I'll tell you, Piatte. I'll tell you because you need a little human consolation: I'm a Republican, you know. I believed in the Revolution—even after the Emperor turned it into a farce."

"It's wonderful to see an issue so clearly; you have to be young before the picture blurs. But the real test is to keep the ideal in your heart; deep down under all the shabby hypocrisy one heaps on top of it."

"You don't need me to tell you that I'm not related to the nobility. My father was a coachman and that's something

I like to remember despite my epaulettes. But the odd thing, Piatte, was that my father loved his Marquis. And so did I, because the fellow was a radical.

"It's strange that a man like that should be chased out of France. Even as a little boy, I can remember what he taught me ; a real creed about the rights of man. It seemed so splendid and so simple : to hear it from M. le Marquis himself. My father and I, we both loved him. And when the Commissioners came down to our part of the world to poke their noses into other peoples loyalties, well, there wasn't any question where our duty lay. We smuggled him on board a fishing boat and he died in England ten years later.

"You know what his last words were to us, there on the Loire bank ? I was only a child, but I've still got them clear in my head. 'This time of trouble will pass,' he said, 'and then we shall start again.' My father couldn't speak. But I waded in and helped shove off the boat.

"It wasn't until I joined the Army that I realised what he'd meant when he talked about every man enjoying freedom. He used to rant against the Church and the men behind the King and, up till then, they'd seemed to me like bogies ; something evil that could never be overthrown ; something that crushed men down and forced them to a wretched way of life.

"But in the Army I soon realised what he'd meant. The Emperor was already crowned, but his men hadn't changed since the days when they marched into Italy.

"By God, those men were more than soldiers. They were Crusaders, men who believed in the rightness of their cause. It was from them that I learnt how they'd been welcomed in every country in Europe ; how the people had come out with flowers because now they were free and could think and do as they wished under a liberal government of their own.

"Don't laugh at me, Piatte. I may seem a naive old fool, but that's how we saw it in those days. To be a Republican was like finding a new religion. And one's prayers were answered because we had a spirit in us that could achieve anything ; anything," he repeated wonderingly.

"Those men I soldiered with are gone now. But in their

time, they'd seen Kings and Cardinals go down like a pack of cards. Nothing could stand before us that was corrupt or rotten. And wherever our armies went, they brought freedom and taught 'men a new way to live.

"But a long war takes the heart out of a crusade. As time went on, there was a change you couldn't fail to notice. Power corrupts and even the Emperor wasn't an exception. Before long I was an officer and then I began to realise what was happening. Spain was my undoing. For the first time I realised what it meant to be hated ; to be looked on with more loathing than we'd ever felt for our own old order.

"One day, Piatte, remind me to tell you what we had to do in Spain. It wasn't pleasant ; it took the heart right out of me and thousands of others. Getting clear of that plague spot was like coming out into the light after years in a dungeon where one's been too long in despair ever to recover. But because the Emperor was in danger, we all recovered in some measure. Dresden, Leipzig ; all those battles to keep the Prussians off the route to Paris.

"And what were we fighting about ? If I'd sat down and asked myself, I really couldn't have found an answer—except to say that I was a soldier and owed the Emperor loyalty. Because, by then, I'd forgotten that any man had any rights at all. I'd forgotten everything except the necessity to keep my men alive.

"And that wasn't easy. We had boys now, no old soldiers but Gounod and myself and a few dozen N.C.O.s. All those men I told you about were dead ; buried in cornfields, in a sandy patch near some river, perhaps beneath a heap of stones in the mountains—I don't know where. I only know they took their dreams and memories with them and left me behind, lonely and full of doubts.

"But, Piatte, I won't weary you with all this. I'm a simple chap. I need something to believe in. And when they forced us back across the Rhine, I found a simple faith, just in defending my own country. It was enough for the boys too, whom I sent into action day after day. Real children with faces alive with enthusiasm. Or, all too often, grown prematurely old.

"But how they fought, Piatte! We were still fighting when Marmont showed us the easy way out. Five years before, he would have been called a traitor, now things were different. A realist, eh?" Boucard chuckled savagely. "That's what they found it convenient to call him."

"But I'm no-one to talk. I found it convenient too. When we surrendered, it never occurred to me that I should resign my commission. No—I stayed on at my post as though I'd never had the honour to serve in a revolutionary army."

"And so I saw the Kings come back. Paris was full of them: Emperors, Dukes and a host of lesser fry to add to the new regime the Emperor had created in the last ten years. And, by God, Piatte, I tell you it reconverted me. Within six months my old ideas were burnt ashes no more. So that when the Emperor landed in the South——" Boucard broke off and puffed his cheeks in and out reflectively.

"You've heard me rave about de la Motte, Piatte? Well, in the battles in Belgium that was what I was fighting against. Those supercilious eyes, that mouth, arrogant but sly. There were dozens like de la Motte who fled out of Paris when the Emperor came. And all through the fighting——" Boucard broke off, chewing his lip again.

"Ah, Piatte, you've been a priest. You've been trained to look into men's minds. Well, look in here"—Boucard tapped his skull in a manner that would have been comical but for his expression—"and tell me what you see. It's shame, shame," he muttered, "and if we were in the confessional together, I couldn't tell you what I endured in the next years."

"You can guess, can't you? The commissions of enquiry; the questions; the false loyalty I protested. Everyone went through it. But some were bigger men than I."

"You talked just now of never escaping the Church. My poor friend, we are floating in the same hopeless cockleshell. Do you think I wanted to face the world outside? Why should I be here now if I didn't serve a master just as exacting? Piatte"—Boucard's voice was pleading—"how could I have left the Army, how could I have torn out something that was bigger than myself?"

"It was your vocation," Piatte said hesitantly.

"My vocation," Boucard repeated. "And until I came to Africa it was like dust in my mouth. All those years in garrison ; fifteen years before I had a flicker of self respect again. And even here, there are still the de la Mottes. My masters," he said quietly, "and I, a battered old Judas professing loyalty with my tongue in my cheek."

"Ah no, Colonel," Piatte said. "Judas took the pieces of silver."

"Didn't I take my pay? Haven't I hoped every year for a revolution? We've seen one King go, but another is in his place. And yet it's brewing up, Piatte," he said thickly. "It's brewing everywhere in Europe."

"It is in the nature of man, Colonel."

"Eighteen forty-five," Boucard muttered. "I tell you, Piatte, within another five years we'll see the barricades again. Not just in France. But Italy, Austria, everywhere our armies marched. We lit the tinder," he said regretfully, "but few of us will be alive to see the results. And yet"—his voice was growing indistinct—"I don't know that I want to see them."

Piatte was silent.

"I still have Gounod," Boucard said abruptly. "Do you know, when he first came as my servant, I tried to treat him like a brother. I believed in looking after my own kit ; an officer is all the better if he polishes his own boots. But it didn't work." He chuckled suddenly. "He got so cross that he offered to fight me ; just so that he could be my servant. Said that if I believed in equality that was the way to settle it." He looked up suddenly at Piatte and smiled.

"You don't say anything? Well, I don't blame you. But both of us fight a rearguard action, eh?"

"Yes, Colonel." Piatte was looking at him affectionately.

"You see what I mean? You understand why I've been telling you all this?"

Piatte nodded.

"Now listen, my boy." Boucard sat up abruptly from where he had been crouching. "They say confession is good for the soul and we've both had a belly full tonight. If it hadn't been for me, you'd have been happy in Sagun, instead of hating yourself in Oran, eh?"

"It doesn't matter, Colonel. What has been has been." Piatte was staring at his companion, his trouble almost forgotten in sympathy for the Colonel's outpouring.

"True enough," Boucard said ; "neither of us can escape. But even in purgatory there may be diversions." His voice had regained its normal hard quality. {

"Diversions?" Piatte said, not understanding.

"What would you say, Piatte, to a razzia on the Duzair? Would that make you feel—a little happier?"

"You are going up the valley?" Despite himself, Piatte could not control the sudden excitement.

"Yes. We are going up the valley," said Boucard, glancing at him keenly, deeply regretting that not even here could he unburden himself to a man well used to secrets.

CHAPTER 17

THE fort had been built at the tip of a rocky promontory which snaked unobtrusively into the sea. It had no name, merely being indicated on the map as Outpost 136. Dominating it stood the semaphore machine, its wooden arms motionless in the heat. When messages passed down the coast, it was as though a little chain of windmills were in motion ; flailing wooden arms which puzzled the Arabs and caused them to mutter with annoyance at the silent talk of the Roumi.

The Signal Sergeant had hauled himself onto a little platform beneath the telegraph. He sat with crossed legs and watched the distant line of men and horses winding painfully up the mountainside. He felt a pleasurable satisfaction since they would be hot up there ; aching warm with the sun pressing down upon their necks.

"Louis," he called to a soldier who sat in a patch of shade near the huts. "What was that the Colonel said about expecting trouble?"

"Said he didn't expect any, Sergeant." The soldier scratched his stomach contentedly and did not trouble to look up.

"You heard what he said, eh? About our telegraph."

"I heard." Attracted by the bitterness in the Sergeant's tone, Louis raised his head.

"A menace, eh?" the Sergeant said, squinting after the column. "Didn't like to think we knew he was coming. As if Fort Trac wouldn't have signalled the news." He was annoyed, but the sight of the tiny figures on the mountainside mollified him. , ,

"Shall I send the message to Sagun, Sergeant?" Louis half rose to his feet and then sank down again.

"Not until Colonel Boucard is out of sight. Once he is over that crest, we'll let them know he is on his way. But not just yet. I don't want him back here, cursing me for doing my duty." He is an old man, the Sergeant was

thinking. Up there, he'll be soaked in sweat and his bones will feel like fire. Why doesn't he get it into his head that he's not a Beau Sabreur any longer.

"Very well, Sergeant." Louis had got to his feet after all. "How long will it be before they get to Sagun?" he asked, leaving the shade of the huts where the other three soldiers were sleeping and climbing some stone steps until he could see over the top of the wall.

"Two days, maybe less." The Sergeant could see the column had reached the crest where the mountains appeared paralysed by the sun; seamed and gullied as though streams of larvae had poured from the crimson ball and gone surging down the mountainside. Up on the crest, the tiny figures were hardly distinguishable. They seemed to float in jerky movement through the haze, like marionettes fluttering on an invisible string. They'll be down the other side in a moment, the Sergeant thought. He had a vision of the narrow plain that would meet their gaze; flat, parched; like a piece of worn-out sandpaper rammed untidily between two strips of mountain.

"Funny that we can see Sagun from here!" Louis was staring across the bay. The reflection from the water seemed to burn his eyeballs. He blinked painfully, shaded his eyes and peered at the line of mist which shrouded the distant shore. Somewhere in that cotton-wool wetness was Sagun and the arms of its semaphore. Strips of metals had been tacked inside the wood. They caught the sun when the telegraph worked.

"If we had a boat," the Sergeant sighed. It was a sore point. With a boat he could have gone fishing. Not that there was much to catch, but a boat would make you independent; free, instead of an automaton chained to the fort. He scratched his bearded chin. "Three or four hours to Sagun in a boat," he said, "whereas, old Boucard has miles—miles to go over those damned mountains. First you go down into the plain. Then comes another mountain. You go up over the top and there's another great ridge. It's like an octopus, a great big octopus with rock tentacles." He glanced up again to where the last tiny figure was vanishing over the crest.

"Safe to send a message yet, Sergeant?"

"Yes. It's safe enough now. Get your slate while I think up my report." He sat on the platform, trying to get the sun out of his brain so that words would make sense. But all that seemed to come was an unreasoning dislike of Colonel Boucard. "Telling me the telegraph's no good," he muttered distractedly.

* * * * *

Boucard rubbed his eyes and stared into the plain. Dusk was coming down as they descended the track; vivid colours which flooded the sky and suffused the mountains.

"We'll have to camp here," he said, annoyed they had not reached Sagun in one day. But the mules had slowed them; protesting and remaining indifferent to the blows showered upon them.

"Duzair country." Piatte was staring at the plain beneath them. In that light it looked soft—almost luscious. Inland, it narrowed to a neck that led back to a long valley.

"We'll bivouac at the bottom of the next ridge." For some unaccountable reason Boucard was conscious of a twinge of apprehension. He lifted his head and peered keenly around.

At the tail of the column, Mignot was urging on Angelo.

"What a devil," he said to Piechut, tugging savagely at the leading rope.

"You're too soft." Piechut was stained with dust but in good spirits. "Give him a good thwack," he said, "or we'll never get to Sagun."

"Looks as if we'll make camp on that ridge." From where they were riding they could see the plain beneath; a smallish stretch of flat sand about three kilometres wide, broken by a few deep gulleys. Two scouts had just reached the flat ground. Behind them, the column was strung out as it descended the slope.

"Like a picture." Piechut gestured to the sky above the mountains. "Like a bloody great picture." He was staring at the rapidly changing colours.

"It only needs your ugly face," Mignot said smugly.

"Now come on, Angelo. I'm hungry and if you don't move faster, I shall have to beat you."

Riding behind the scouts, Oursel was thinking of the interrupted game of chess. It had looked promising ; he'd only lost a knight. Now I'll be shut up in Sagun, he thought. And Captain Hennessy is away at El Oud. "Close up," he shouted irritably to the troopers. He looked back to where Piatte was riding beside Bouchard. Those mules, he murmured aloud, watching Piechut and Mignot who were leisurely reaching the flat ground.

"Piatte." Boucard was staring towards the ridge opposite.

"Yes, Colonel."

"Do you feel anything ?"

"No, Colonel. It seems very quiet." Piatte glanced quickly at the heavy face.

"I may be wrong, but I can smell trouble. Ride out with the scouts and keep your eyes open. And you men"—Boucard turned in his saddle—"close up behind. Get those mules moving." His voice went echoing through the still air.

As the line of men and horses trotted across the plain, Boucard could feel a twitching in the scar on his cheek. It was familiar ; a sure instinct, but he could see nothing ; no sign in the warm light. Ahead, the ridge lay dead and inert ; the stony track clear amongst a confusion of grey boulders. Piatte was riding in front with the scouts. There was hardly any sound ; only the noise of creaking leather and the thud of hooves.

"Gounod," he said, shifting uneasily in his saddle, "do you smell powder ?"

"No, Colonel. And I don't expect to, not in this valley."

"I must be getting old," Boucard thought. But he could not sit still. The silence seemed to hang around him ; ominous and unreasonable. He longed for a musket shot ; any noise that would break the tension. But nothing happened and they rode on until they were very close to the ridge.

Oursel and Piatte were riding together and could not believe their eyes. From a gulley beneath the ridge, a group of white-robed horsemen came flooding over the sands towards them. For a moment it seemed impossible. They rode so

silently, fanning out to envelop the column ; pushing their horses into a gallop ; their numbers growing as fresh horsemen flowed out from amongst the rocks.

Already the scouts had turned and were galloping back. Piatte wrenched his carbine from its bucket and levelled it at the Arabs. The report sounded unnaturally loud but no one fell.

"Damn it," he whispered. He turned Cerise, dug his feet into her belly, and followed Oursel who was already galloping towards the surprised troopers who stared as though dreaming.

It was then he heard Boucard's voice ; loud and infinitely comforting.

"Get back." He was bellowing. "Get back into the gulley behind you."

At that moment, the Arabs began to yell ; a high, fanatic shouting with blood in it that gave a delicate wrench to his stomach. He could see Boucard and Gounod galloping now amidst the other troopers. Somewhere in front, Oursel's horse was breathing like a bellows. Piatte turned his head, to see the scouts trying desperately to escape. As he watched, one of them flew over his horse's head while the animal stumbled and seemed to fall on its knees, turning a great cart-wheel until it lay kicking violently on the sand. Piatte lowered his head as something whistled close beside him. He had not heard the shot but now the dry crack of muskets seemed to fill the plain. They must be firing from the saddle. They'd never hit him that way. He felt a sudden excitement. Oran was forgotten ; wiped out in the physical exhilaration that seemed to explode with every bound of the mare beneath him.

Boucard too could hear the Arabs yelling. He lay flat on Austerlitz's neck and knew from the pain in his thighs that he was really old.

"Damn them," he muttered, catching sight of Mignot vanishing into the gulley. Austerlitz was breaking him with this tremendous movement. If only it would stop ; this intolerable pain that was tearing his inside to pieces. He forced himself to concentrate on the gulley. It was coming closer ; a deep black slit in the flat ground. Somewhere behind, he heard a frantic yell and was filled with hatred

against the Arabs. The bastards, he thought. Their raucous screeching seemed to fill the air, drowning the wild creak of leather and the heavy, desperate breathing.

Suddenly the gulley was beneath them. He forced Austerlitz down and together they slid to the bottom in a shower of sand. He forced himself out of the saddle and began to run up the slope, breathing heavily, half blind with sand. But as he ran, a shower of men and horses seemed to explode over his head. He had a sudden glimpse of waving hooves and slobbering white mouths. He heard voices shouting and was half buried as a horse ploughed up the sand ; its rump knocking him sideways on his face. With the breath out of him, he cursed and got back on his knees. The gulley seemed full of plunging horses. There was a smell of terror. He spat the sand out of his mouth and scrambled up the steep bank. "To me," he yelled, his voice strangled with rage and sand. Another horseman came over the top in a great curving leap ; his horse stumbling and finishing the descent on its haunches, neighing with surprise.

"To me, to me," Boucard yelled again. He got his head over the top of the gulley and peered through the curtain of drifting sand. Right in front, Oursel was riding towards the gulley. Boucard hardly saw him. He was staring at the Arabs. In graceful white lines they were flowing round the gulley, pushing out in two curving horns to surround the trapped column. Boucard's mouth opened and shut. Over a hundred without a doubt. And Duzair ! He found Piatte beside him and the whole lip of the gulley crowded with troopers, pushing forward their carbines and fumbling in their pouches.

"Take the other side, Piatte," he shouted. "Leave two men with the horses. Where's Gounod ? " his eyes searched the stretch of sand in front. "Holy Virgin," the words slipped soundlessly from his mouth. . . .

Sixty yards away, the Duzair were fighting over the canvas packages ; slashing the cords with knives and pulling the unwieldy bundles from the dead mule. Nearby, a tribesman was finishing Piechut, whose horse lay spreadeagled ; an inanimate mound of flesh. "There you are," shouted

Boucard and knew a fierce pain as the first carbine banged off beside his ear. He felt the blast in his eardrum but saw the Arab kneeling above Piechut rear up and crumple slowly on his back. Unaware of the bullets now thudding into the sand, he saw the Arabs gathered round the mule collapsing. They seemed to freeze and then go suddenly to pieces ; crumpling over the packages. He let out a great bellow of laughter, watching an Arab, half into his saddle, suddenly collapse and tumble like a heap of white rags onto the ground.

"Good shooting," Boucard roared. The smell of terror had vanished amidst the acrid powder. His laugh rang out again and the troopers, pressed in the sand, laughed with him ; ramming in new cartridges, biting the wrappings with their teeth ; their sudden fear forgotten ; oblivious of the whinnying horses below or the bullets that cut sprays in the sand around them.

Almost at once the Duzair made their attack. They came galloping across the sand, shouting and firing their muskets.

"Aim carefully," Boucard yelled. "Shoot the horses." He waited until he could see a tribesman at the tip of his carbine ; the muzzle seemed to fit comfortably into the moving target. He was hardly aware of the explosion, but saw the horse rise up. For a moment it stood on its back legs and then fell sideways, kicking in the sand. Boucard cursed as he reloaded. He longed for a gun that would hold and fire six cartridges. Some day some fellow would invent one. But that did not help him now with the Arabs coming closer. Rapidly he went through the familiar movements. Behind him, he could hear Piatte's men firing and the sudden brief shouts of triumph. Then the carbine was ready and he thrust it forward. The Arabs were frighteningly close ; almost on the gully. He fired again and felt a fierce satisfaction. But now the Duzair were on top of them and he pulled the pistol from his belt and fired straight into the belly of a horse rearing up above him. He could not see the effects but the legs lashed out and there came a frantic screaming. He heard his own voice roaring orders. For a moment the gully appeared ringed with men and horses. Savage faces stared down, there was a glint of steel. The air was thick with

flying sand and somewhere below he was conscious that horses were screaming. If they get in there, we are finished, he thought. But he felt only a wild exultation and was hardly aware of the sword in his hand.

It seemed as though the Duzair must sweep over the gulley. But on the very edge, staring down into the mass of terrified horses, they appeared to loose purpose. They fired aimlessly into the horses, yelling and shouting to their comrades on the opposite side who were still held back by the fire of Piatte's troopers. And, as they hesitated, Boucard and his troopers rose from the sand beside them ; stabbing, firing pistols into their horses, seizing the tribesmen by the legs and wrenching them bodily from their saddles. In the midst of the confusion was a terrible old man with the voice of an eagle. His sword was broken but it was never still. He raged amongst them, hacking and shouting in a voice unlike any they had heard before. It was like that of a man afflicted and though they slashed at him, leaning from their saddles, the keenness of their swords seemed blunted. At last they drew back afraid and then the Roumi rushed on them more fiercely ; calling to his soldiers in that terrible voice. A sudden fear swept hold of them. The gulley was an accursed place. A tribesman faltered and turned his horse. And then, like a cataract, they went pouring back ; leaving the broken shambles of the fight behind.

"Reload," Boucard roared. "Fire into them." He looked round but could see nothing for the mist that had come over his eyes. Somewhere in that bloodshot darkness the troopers must have heard his voice. He shouted again, knowing that this opportunity must not be missed. But when he heard Piatte's voice he was thankful. And a moment later, when the carbines began to speak, he was conscious of a desperate weariness ; an indescribable longing to sit down. But he fought against it ; fought with the last strength he could pull out of his tired body. In a moment, the mist would clear. He heard Gounod's voice and felt an arm pressed comfortingly into his back.

Piatte watched the two men with a tightness in his chest. He had come running from the other side when it had seemed

there was no chance of stopping the Duzair. He had seen the Colonel standing up amongst them ; had heard his voice and watched the sword snap as he wrenched it sideways from the falling body of a horseman. During the next minutes he had fought with one eye on Boucard ; stupidly, as the musket ball which had passed along his chest had taught him. But, in that moment, he had loved Boucard ; had known his true worth ; had seen the selflessness beneath the crude exterior. In these moments he had found something infinitely worth while. Now he was filled with a sudden dread that the Colonel was going to die.

"He'll be all right, sir." Gounod's arm was round Boucard's shoulders. "It's this mist he gets," he explained. "You look after the Arabs, Captain." He began to lead the Colonel gently down into the shelter of the gulley.

* * * * *

"Keep your head down, Oursel," Piatte whispered. He had been listening to the sounds going on in the gulley below and was still shivering violently. He made room as the Sergeant crawled up beside him and resumed his peering into the darkness where the tribesmen appeared to have vanished but for an occasional musket ball that sang in their direction. It was quite a time before he could bring himself to say :

"You've done it, Sergeant ?"

Oursel nodded, apparently unmoved. What a swine he is, Piatte thought. But the Sergeant's next words made him feel ashamed.

"You know, Captain Piatte, that's the thing I hate most. We know what we are about, we take our chances. But those horses, poor creatures, it makes you think. Seven I had to shoot, the Colonel's amongst them. I think it's the way they look at you, trusting right up to the end. Except that mule ! Look, sir. What do you think our chances are ?"

"Not bad," Piatte said, "if only they knew what had happened at Sagun."

"You can never tell with the wind," Oursel said. "Sometimes it carries very well. They ought to have heard the firing." His voice was doubtful.

"Exactly." Piatte was thinking of the Colonel. He felt peculiarly alone now that the familiar voice with its forceful confidence was curiously stilled.

"I'm ready to do the best I can." Oursel was only concerned with their situation. "The horses left are fresh enough, sir. With any luck——" He did not go on but licked his tongue thoughtfully around the edges of his mouth. "Why not, Captain?" he asked as Piatte shook his head.

"Suicide," Piatte said shortly. "The tribesmen will be watching every path across the ridge. If I let anyone go, it would be myself."

"At your orders, Captain." Oursel shrugged resignedly. "Can you make out what they are doing?" he asked after a long pause.

"Holding some kind of meeting," Piatte said. "They've taken those horses right back and left dozens of sharpshooters dug in behind those heaps of sand. They'll probably attack at dawn. You know the way they come galloping in just as the light is rising."

"Yes," Oursel said, "I know." He looked at Piatte and whistled softly through his teeth.

* * * * *

Down in the gulley, Boucard could hear their voices; a soft whispering that nagged because decisions might be being made without his knowledge. Lying on the sand with his head propped up against a saddle, he was conscious of a struggle going on inside; a determination slowly enforcing control over his thumping heart.

"Gounod," he whispered to the figure watching beside him, "give me another drop of water." He held the bottle to his lips, feeling the liquid cold and dank. In another minute he would make the effort.

"You ought to watch that heart." Gounod's irritable voice concealed his anxiety.

"Nothing wrong with my heart," Boucard said. "Besides, there's no time, not here."

"You leave this business to the Captain, Colonel Boucard.

You've done more than enough and should be in your bed at Sagun."

"In bed!" Boucard sat up suddenly. He was relieved to find that his heart was not choking him any longer. His head too was clear. In a moment he would be on his feet again.

"You lie down, Colonel," Gounod said dourly. He bent forward to shift the tunic which he had placed over Boucard's legs.

"Listen, Gounod"—Boucard was talking to reassure himself—"from now on there will be no more lying down. How can there be?" he asked suddenly. "There's too much to do."

"The Commandant will be here in the morning."

"I'll believe that when I see him. But I wasn't talking about this mess."

"No?" Gounod's voice was sharp.

"Listen, you old crow. I'm on the point of achieving a campaign that will go down in history."

"Bah!" Gounod said disgustedly.

"Once I've accomplished this thing, my heart can do what it likes. But I won't let it stop me now."

"Look, Colonel Boucard, we are in a bad enough mess already."

"Child's play," Boucard muttered, thinking desperately. But no idea came; only a determination that somehow the Leopard must not escape.

"Child's play is it? Sitting here with a crew of dead men and horses for company. And all that damned bandsmen's gear, littering up the place."

"Bandsmen?" Boucard said suddenly.

"On the mule," Gounod grumbled on. He sat watching the Colonel out of the corner of his eye, gauging the struggle and speculating whether Boucard would once again triumph over his bodily weakness.

"Give me a hand up." Boucard's voice seemed all at once more powerful. Struggling up, he leant on Gounod, grateful for the support but conscious now that he would be able to manage alone. In his mind, he could see a row of

glittering brass instruments ; it had worked before and there was not a minute to be lost.

"Piatte," he called and watched the Captain slither down the gulley. Gently he freed himself from Gounod's arm, aware that in some mysterious manner his strength was flowing back. He held himself erect as Piatte came hurrying towards him, amused but touched by the anxious expression which the weak moonlight distorted, so that the Captain's face appeared creased with anger.

"How are you, Colonel?" Piatte's voice with its undertone of anxiety sounded strangely comforting. It strengthened Boucard's resolve, made him even more certain of his strength.

"All right now," he said, "but we have got to get out of this gulley. Come with me, Piatte. I've an idea that will make these insolent tribesmen put their heads together." He turned abruptly and made his way along the floor of the gulley. Now that he was moving, it seemed incredibly easy. So strong was the certainty in his mind that he no longer noticed his heart. He stepped carefully over two bodies and then found his way barred by the collapsed carcase of a horse.

"This way, Colonel." Piatte gave him a hand and Boucard strode across. The narrow area seemed jammed with dead horses. Farther on he could see the survivors standing placidly silent.

"Find the mule, Piatte," he said quietly. He stood watching whilst the Captain peered amongst the jumbled limbs.

"It's here, Colonel." Piatte's voice showed that he did not relish the work. Boucard came across to him chuckling slightly and together they stood staring down at the mule whose body lay deep in shadow, a number of dark bundles still strapped securely to its pack saddle.

"Mignot," Boucard called. He stood waiting until a figure emerged farther down the gulley. He felt vibrantly alive again and was impatient until the bandy-legged trooper picked his way across.

"Give me your knife," he said, trembling now with excitement.

"My knife, sir?" Still dazed by Piechut's death, Mignot did not share the Colonel's enthusiasm.

"Your knife, man. No, better still, do it yourself. I want all those packages off the mule, Mignot. Now hurry, man; every one of those packages."

The moon had risen when the troopers gathered around the Colonel. Boucard squatted above his treasures; a drum, two trumpets, a long-necked instrument which he imagined must be a bassoon and a pair of cymbals. He had placed them in a line, enjoying the puzzlement on the men's faces.

"Listen," he said, rising to his feet. "You know what our chances are here?" He watched the faces; each one a familiar mask concealing private fear. "It's not so bad as all that," he said kindly, conscious he could afford to be generous. "Which of you can play one of these?" He pointed to the instruments.

There was a long silence. The men stared at him questioningly. Even Piatte showed no inkling of what was coming. "Gounod can," Boucard said. "You can play the trumpet, can't you?"

"Yes, Colonel. But what use is that to us here?"

"It will save your neck." All at once Boucard felt he could waste no more time. "Here, take the thing and blow it." He bent down, picked up the trumpet and pushed it into Gounod's hands. "Blow it!" he commanded, "and don't ask questions. And you, Mignot—pick up those cymbals and give them a clash. Sanglier—take the bassoon. Piatte—show them how you can play that other trumpet."

"But, Colonel"—Piatte found the trumpet in his hand—"I can't play a note."

"Nor can I play this drum. But I'm going to make a devil of a noise. Now—do you get the idea?" Boucard scated himself on the ground and placed the drum in front of him. "Ready?" he asked, raising the drumsticks to his lips in a jaunty fashion. "Now when I give the signal—all of you play like fury. It'll put the fear of God into the Arabs and perhaps they'll hear us at Sagun. It's a chance, you understand, but a good one. The Arabs won't like this at all. Are you all ready? One, two, three." He brought the drumsticks thudding down on the tight skin and almost immediately there came a mighty clash from Mignot's cymbals.

Gounod's trumpet joined in in a piercing bray whilst strangled sounds came from the bulging brass bassoon which was wound incongruously around Sanglier's bulky neck. So startling was the noise that Piatte was taken aback. Then seeing them playing around him like madmen, he raised the trumpet to his lips and tried to force the air through its resisting mouth-piece.

The horses began to whinney in terror. • Up above, Oursel stopped his ears. The noise rose out of the gulley in an unearthly wail and flooded across the moonlit sand. It's like a terrible Mardi Gras, he thought, peering down at the musicians whose bulging cheeks and glinting instruments appeared obscene so close to the bodies of the dead and the tangled maws of horses at the bottom of the gulley. From amidst the din, came the steady thumping of a drum and a hoarse voice shouting verses from the Marseillaise. It's the Colonel, Oursel thought. What a man ! He was filled with pride. Then the horses whinneyed again from the gulley and he sent a trooper down to quiet them ; remaining where he was, with his carbine pushed forward, staring across the sand to where the Duzair must be lying, puzzled at such a strange celebration in the Roumi camp.

"Keep it going," Boucard yelled, between snatches of song. He wondered how long Piatte and Sanglier would last, blowing wind into those brass tubes. Well, he'd take over himself if they couldn't go on. Meantime, he was enjoying himself. Not too hard, he thought, or I'll split the drum. But the booming thud that echoed every time he hit the skin gave him intense pleasure. He could hear it plainly despite the monotonous clash of Mignot's cymbals and the hard, fierce calls that Gounod was wrenching from the trumpet. Even as he sang—great stretches of words that poured from his mouth without the need of memory—his mind was working methodically. They'd never dare attack after this—for the credulous fools would believe that some devil afflicted the gulley. But would this noise reach Sagun ? He thought of Zeller in the fort, endeavouring to make contact with his mother. The thought pleased him and he hit the drum a little harder. That was good. Even in this god-forsaken gulley, that was a

joke. Here they were, bursting their lungs to get into touch with Zeller whilst the Commandant was worrying about his mother. Which of us is going to be the stronger? he wondered. Colonel Boucard or Madame Zeller? "Play harder," he shouted as though answering his own question. And, like a despairing, cacophonous wail, the unearthly noise rose louder from the gulley, spreading and carrying clearly over the sand, and rolling flatly towards the mountain ridges.

* * * * *

Miles away, in Fort 136, the Sergeant was sitting with his can of soup when the first sounds came weakly across the mountains. For a time, he was puzzled. But, as it persisted, he got to his feet and climbed to the platform beneath the semaphore machine. Below him, the fort was bathed in moonlight; the outlines of walls and huts, hard and clear. But once he looked towards the mountains everything became indistinct and mysterious; a row of jagged peaks hardly distinguishable from the moving banks of cloud. It's Boucard, he thought. He must have run into trouble. He looked affectionately at the motionless arms of the telegraph.

"Sergeant." It was Louis' voice.

"What is it?"

"What's that noise out there?"

"Someone in trouble," the Sergeant said laconically. "Someone who didn't have much use for our telegraph. Well, he'll learn to bless us as soon as it's light. Louis—you'd better take down the message now so we can get it through to Sagun when the sun comes up."

CHAPTER 18

THE entire garrison was on the walls when the Chasseurs came into sight with Colonel Boucard in their midst. Caps and shakos had gone spinning in the air as soon as Zeller announced the news, putting down his telescope with a relief that was not mirrored in his confident expression.

As the cloud of dust came nearer and individual faces were distinguishable, a great roar of cheering broke out which echoed flatly inside the fort. In the midst of the noise, even Lebel experienced a new confidence and ran up the steps onto the parapet, caught in the wild enthusiasm that spread rapidly until everyone inside Sagun appeared touched by the sun ; shrieking indistinguishable sentences of welcome and dancing on the hot stonework like a crowd of agitated marionettes whose master had hopelessly tangled the strings.

Boucard rode through the gates still brandishing the drum. He waved it high so that Zeller could see and in answer an unseen drummer beat out a staccato applause. Beside him d'Auberon kept glancing at the Colonel whose face, smiling contentedly, belied the anxious hours spent in the gulley the previous night. As they passed under the gateway, Boucard tossed the drum to Gounod and smiled at d'Auberon, who felt overwhelmingly pleased, as though something very important had happened. He had completely forgotten his desperate ride early that morning, could no longer recall the anxiety with which he had peered down at an apparently empty plain through his telescope or how angry he had been when de Courcy had ordered the trumpeter to sound the Regimental call : something he should have thought of immediately himself. He jumped down out of the saddle and held Boucard's horse whilst he dismounted heavily. As he stood there the memory of Austerlitz lying dead in the gulley passed fleetingly through his mind. Then he saw the Commandant hurrying down the steps and turned away to give orders about the horses.

"Colonel!" Zeller said, putting out his hand.

"You imagined they had caught me?" Boucard pressed Zeller's hand warmly, moved by the obvious affection. "Now listen, Zeller," he said quickly, "everything is all right. I mean about Oran."

"But what happened on the way back. Was it the Leopard?"

"No," Boucard said. "Only some of the Duzair. Now what's all this excitement about?" He jabbed a finger at the crowds of soldiers streaming past down the steps.

"Can't you guess?" Zeller said, smiling.

"Ha," Boucard grunted, pleased but conscious that time was running on. "There's something better for them to do than stand about cheering. Don't look at me like that, Zeller. I want every officer in the mess hut in ten minutes' time."

* * * * *

The hammocks and boxes had only just been cleared away when Boucard walked into the hut, waving the officers to sit down as they crowded round him.

"Gentlemen," he said when he was able to control the excitement which made him tremble and seemed reflected in each eager face, "I have some news for you: something that is going to please you.

"I know," he said, pausing until there was dead silence, "what it has meant to you, cooped up here in Sagun. Before I left for Oran, you gave me a valuable reminder that men can't sit inactive for too long at a stretch.

"Well—now, you won't be able to reproach me. I've watched you, felt your passions rising after El Oud. Passion is a valuable emotion in its right place." He went on, watching the faces tremulous with curiosity, knowing he could not keep this secret from them much longer. Poor Hennessy, he thought. How he would enjoy this.

"We are going on a razzia." His voice was loud, exuding confidence. "But no ordinary raid. Audincourt here will tell you that the Leopard is in the mountains. I mean to catch him, gentlemen, and you will assist me."

"The Leopard, Colonel?" Piatte was leaning forward, wondering why Boucard had kept this to himself. But amidst the confused buzz of exclamation that broke out around him, the sense of enquiry was lost, being replaced by a growing enthusiasm, contagious in the atmosphere.

Amidst the noise, Boucard remained quite silent. Unlike the moment in Oran when de la Motte had reluctantly given his permission, he felt a sense of doubt; a faint nagging that somehow spoilt his intended triumph. But the decision was irrevocable, had been made in his mind too long ago. He recalled what he had said to Zeller about intuition—every battle should be fought that way. He swallowed a little, knowing these excited men must suffer should anything go wrong. Yet the words came easily enough when he began to speak.

"We shall march within the next two days," he said. "Zeller, you'll send a galloper immediately to recall Hennessy from El Oud. Leave a few men with Jacquot and we will pick them up en route. But I want Hennessy's Zouaves fitted out with the best we can give them. And that goes for all of you. This will be no easy campaign. We shall carry two weeks' rations and all the ammunition we can."

"Colonel?" Audincourt had risen to his feet and one glance told Boucard that the business of the Duzair was not forgotten. "Colonel," Audincourt repeated, seemingly unable to get out the words.

"What is it?" Boucard looked at him shrewdly.

"There's one important point you haven't mentioned. Someone has got to stay here in Sagun."

"And you hope it will not be yourself?" Boucard asked, noticing the sudden constraint in the faces near him. "Eh?" he said when Audincourt did not answer.

"I want to go, Colonel." There was so much pleading in those eyes that Boucard knew he could not leave Audincourt behind.

"We'll settle that later," he said gruffly.

"Where is he, Colonel? Where's the Leopard?" Big, bear-like Arnould was leaning forward.

"On the Bakhir plateau," Bouchard said. "The tribes

are coming in slowly and he won't be able to move for a week or so. Now listen carefully." He began to outline his plan.

* * * * *

It was dusk before the officers streamed out of the hut, talking excitedly and leaving Zeller and the Colonel to make their way more leisurely towards the parapet. Cooking fires were glowing and crackling and already an atmosphere of urgency seemed to have settled upon the fort.

"No-one will eat much tonight," Zeller said reflectively.

"More fools they." Boucard had completely regained his confidence; the detailed plans, the flow of question and answer, the expectant faces of men who knew their work and trusted to his direction had all contributed to a growing sense of certainty.

"There was one thing, Colonel?" Zeller's voice was cool and methodical, but even in the dusk, Boucard was aware how closely the Commandant was watching him.

"Yes?" Boucard said guardedly.

"The Duzair village. If any of the huts catch alight——" Zeller left the words unfinished.

"You heard what I said in there? Not a hut is to be fired. We'll leave sentries with the women and children and the flocks and deal with them on our way back."

"I wish there were any other route to the plateau," Zeller said.

"But there is no other way. We can only get there if we go through the Duzair valley. And even if there was an alternative route, it wouldn't do to take it. No, it certainly wouldn't do," he repeated significantly, looking at Zeller.

"Then—it's as I thought, Colonel?"

"I don't know exactly what you were thinking?" Boucard said cautiously. "Incidentally, you'd better leave Lebel here in the fort. He will be little use when it comes to a fight."

"Colonel," Zeller said, "you haven't answered my question."

"Do I have to, Zeller?"

"Yes," Zeller said. "You know I trust you, but I'd like to know just the same."

"You are sure you want it this way?" Boucard asked, and saw Zeller nod.

"Very well," he said, "I'm taking a chance. I know it and I'm sorry you have to be dragged in. But there's no other way. De la Motte believes I'm going after the Duzair. I don't need to tell you any more, eh?"

"No, Colonel," Zeller said.

"Would you rather stay behind?" Boucard had stopped and was looking at him, intently aware that if Zeller said "yes" some vital part of his own confidence would be destroyed. He waited whilst Zeller seemed to debate the matter within himself, discovering that he was beginning to tremble as the seconds dragged into minutes.

"No, Colonel, I'm coming with you." Zeller's voice was calm and decided.

"It's a gamble," Boucard said half-doubtfully.

"Not with you."

"You shouldn't say things like that."

"I say what I believe. You've had bad luck, Colonel Boucard, but I know you well enough to understand that that's all it was."

Boucard opened his mouth but Zeller went on:

"Soldiers like me don't ever get very far in the Army. I know my own limitations and accept them. But all of us have some hope, some special ideal that consequently has to be expressed through others. If you were to catch the Leopard, Colonel, it would mean far more to me than promotion; it would be the biggest moment in my life because I'd helped you, because I'd believed in you."

"You mean that?" Boucard was deeply moved and stood uncertain what to say.

"I've embarrassed you, Colonel," Zeller said, but his smile was so trusting that Boucard was ashamed.

"No." Boucard's voice was strangely uncertain. "It's just that nobody has said anything like that to me since— But come on, Zeller," he said, recovering himself; aware that somehow he must keep on talking.

* * * * *

Zeller stirred uneasily in his hammock. Before going to sleep, he had tried to make contact with his mother. But the

familiar ritual had failed. He had been unable to concentrate. One half of his mind had been on Boucard's words, which kept coming back in little snatches ; breaking his concentration so that, at last, in desperation, he had abandoned the attempt and undressed and climbed into the swinging hammock. He had gone to sleep almost immediately. It was an old trick he had learned. But his dreams were disturbing ; through them, some influence was trying to reach him.

"Albert." Suddenly he was conscious of the voice. How many times had he heard it, running home from school and opening the shop door, saying good-bye when he had left for his first term at the military school ?

"Mother," he said in his dream.

"I do not want you to go on this journey, because you are serving the purpose of another man."

"A journey ?" He could feel the words form themselves on his lips.

"Soon you will start on a journey. You will go because of another man's ambition. You love him, but he will only bring you harm. Remember how hard I worked to pay for you to be a soldier. Tell him you will not risk your life because of his ambition. He is a good man, but he does not care about you. Only about himself."

"Mother." Suddenly Zeller found himself sitting up in a wildly swinging hammock. It was pitch-black ; only a tiny sliver of moonlight through the grating. His heart was thumping violently. He was still not certain whether he was dreaming or awake. He crossed himself, and then, with a great effort, jumped from the hammock and began searching desperately for his tinder box.

As the flame grew, he could see there was no-one in the room. Deep shadows clung to the narrow corners. It was still and quiet. He rubbed his forehead in sudden panic.

CHAPTER 19

HENNESSY stood inside the gateway of Sagun and looked at the line of sunburnt faces with affection. It was almost like coming home. These were his men, his children who stood awaiting the order to dismiss. He gave the order and they fell out ; thirsty and covered with dust ; chattering in excited voices as they hurried away to the huts which were their homes.

Accompanied by Bondeaux, Hennessy walked towards his own quarters. He was puzzled by the activity in the fort. Marching past the horse lines, he had noticed the same feverish air of preparation : the rows of glistening horses and rough-coated mules, the piles of stores, the light-hearted faces.

"There's something up, Captain." Bondeaux looked with raised eyebrows at the piles of pack saddles heaped outside the Quarter-Master's stores. "Everyone buzzing like a lot of bees," he said, eyeing a queue of infantrymen outside the powder magazine.

Hennessy nodded. He could see a Sergeant breaking open a case of biscuits, whilst outside another hut sat a group of soldiers methodically winding bandages. Biscuits and bandages, he thought. That means a razzia. At that moment he saw Piatte coming out of a hut.

"Henri," he shouted.

"Jean, my dear fellow." Piatte's face lit up. He ran forward and seized Hennessy by the hand. "It's good to see you," he said—and Hennessy was surprised how young he looked. The deep lines of worry appeared to have softened. He smiled and talked rapidly all the time.

"You haven't heard the news, Henri ? Well, even you should be satisfied this time. It's a razzia on the Duzair. But after that we go on into the mountains. The Snow Leopard is up there and the Colonel swears he will catch him."

"The Leopard." Hennessy's face was serious. "That's a tall order, Henri."

"Don't you believe it." Piatte snapped his fingers and Hennessy was amazed at the change that had come over him.

"I hope you are right," he said.

"Don't look so glum, Henri. I've got to get back to my horses. We're taking so much forage, the poor beasts will hardly be able to walk. See you later." He slapped Hennessy on the back and hurried off towards the gate.

In the hut, whilst Bondeaux hung up his equipment, Hennessy washed slowly in a large brass bowl. He washed carefully all over ; placing one foot in the bowl at a time. As he rubbed, he felt a vague disquiet. It wasn't practicable. He just couldn't see it. Ordinarily, he would have felt a quickening of the blood ; a throbbing excitement, but this morning it wasn't that way at all. He was almost shivering in the heat.

When he began to rub himself with the towel, he felt better. He looked at the long, purple scar that ran along his stomach. He could remember how surprised he had been that it did not hurt. Not at first ; just a blow as though someone had hit him with a hammer. The Duzair must have been hidden amongst the rocks. But he'd been grateful to that tribesman because he'd relieved his worst fear. He'd never worried about being killed. But a wound—he had actually lain awake wondering what it must be like. And then, when it happened, there wasn't anything to be frightened of at all.

"Thank you, Bondeaux," he said, putting his hands through the armholes as the orderly held out his shirt. Perhaps old Boucard knew what he was doing. He whistled a few bars from Robert the Devil. How he'd like to go to the opera again. But Arab music was not too bad once you acquired a taste for it ; dead toneless stuff but strangely moving in your stomach.

"You'll have to cut my hair tonight," he told Bondeaux.

"But not too short, Captain." Bondeaux had a horror that one day he would be ordered to shave the Captain's head. Many of the soldiers did that before setting out on a campaign and the Captain was always threatening. Of course he didn't mean it. He knew Bondeaux had been a hairdresser before he became a Zouave. It would offend his sense of

propriety—for Bondeaux took a pride in his officer's appearance. He sighed, pushing the comb back into his pocket. He would never have joined the Army if that jealous husband hadn't threatened him. And yet she had forced herself on him ; literally forced herself. He sighed again and began to clear up the room.

Walking towards the steps, Hennessy almost stumbled into Lebel. He saw the harelip jerk back and the sudden frightened expression in the eyes. He felt an immense distaste, but in a few days they would all be in danger and there was no room for ill-feeling in the mountains.

"Good morning, Lebel," he said.

"Good morning, Captain Hennessy." The voice was cold and tremulous. Lebel's eyes seemed to go round in circles.

"Don't look so startled." Hennessy knew that he must make an effort. "Let's forget what's been between us," he said, putting out his hand and smiling.

"You are very kind, Captain." A struggle was going on in Lebel's mind. For a moment it seemed as though he would take the outstretched hand. Then he fought back his weakness and stared at the Captain. "It's no use," he said, "we don't see things the same way." He yearned to take Hennessy by the hand, to be his friend, to be able to laugh and drink with him. But that terrible memory held him back. "No," he said again, conscious of the nervous pain in his lip. He turned and dodged past Hennessy, feeling himself trapped, and almost ran across the square, knowing the Captain's eyes were boring into his back.

Hennessy stared after the ungainly figure. He felt a sensation of dismay and then a sudden anger. He's impossible, he thought. What a disgusting creature. He shrugged his shoulders, still angry and upset. Then he began to mount the steps leading up to the parapet.

At the top, he saw Boucard coming out of his office. The Colonel's heavy face was genial but preoccupied. He noticed Hennessy and his face lit up. Without returning the salute, he stepped forward and thrust out his hand.

"Hennessy," he said, "I'm glad you are back."

"I too, Colonel." Not a word about the incident. Only

the firm pressure of his hand, the big open face. How different from that little rat scuttling across the square.

"You've heard the news?" Boucard's eyes twinkled.

"The fort speaks for itself." Hennessy pointed down at the groups of men, busy sorting stores.

"We shall trap him," the Colonel said. "Never in my life have I been so certain of any one thing. But what's happening at El Qud? Are the Duzair making trouble?"

"Not a sign, Colonel. It's been quiet as the grave." Hennessy suddenly remembered Brosset. "I've left Jacquot up there with ten men. I watched the villages but there are no fighting men. They must have gone to join the Leopard."

"They nearly had me the other day," Boucard said jovially.

"So I hear, Colonel. Do you think we are strong enough to deal with them?" Hennessy asked suddenly.

"Of course." Boucard's voice radiated confidence. "Do you think I'd risk my soldiers unless I was certain? The tribes will be coming in slowly. We shall catch him unprepared. And then"—his big fingers opened and closed—"then, my dear Hennessy, we shall enjoy a real field day. Now don't look so doubtful," he went on. "Have I ever been wrong yet? Have I ever sent you anywhere where I wouldn't go myself?"

"No, Colonel."

"I'm depending on you. I know your Zouaves will do well. But it's to their officers that I look. To men who have already proved themselves."

"Yes, Colonel." The doubts were fading; routed by the Colonel's fierce energy.

"Then get yourself ready, my boy. You'll have to load your men. Fourteen days' rations and all the powder and bullets you can carry. Look at that damned telegraph." He gestured to where the wooden arms had begun to flail.

"It's the recognition signal, sir. I've learnt to know something about this semaphore. They must have received a signal."

"Some nonsense, I'll be bound," Boucard said roughly.

"Probably there's been a new motion in the Chamber." He laughed and then went on quickly : "And see to their boots before they start. You'd better take a stock of leather. Those mountains play hell with boots. You haven't any sick men, have you?"

"Only one, sir. He cut his hand at El Oud and it's poisoned."

"Well, leave him here. I'm taking all the mules for the field hospital."

"You remember the well at El Oud, Colonel?"

"The well, yes?"

"I've built a cairn of stones around it, a sort of sangar. I wish we could take a column up there and rebuild the fort; I'd like to see the well under cover. It's still risky as it is."

"Yes, it's a bad position." Boucard had noticed the Signal Sergeant walking towards them.

"That's what I've always felt. If only that spring were in a different place." Hennessy looked idly at the Sergeant walking along the parapet.

"Yes." Boucard acknowledged the Sergeant's salute. He took the outstretched slate and glanced idly at the message, written in a round, childish hand. At first, it meant nothing, but gradually the letters began to form into words and then into brief sentences. He choked slightly and with a great effort, went on talking to Hennessy.

"That's all for the moment, Captain." His eyes bulged a little but he kept his voice steady. It was all he could do to hold the slate; to keep himself from smashing it on the stone parapet.

"Very well, Colonel. I'll be off and see what those rascals of mine are up to." Hennessy saluted and clattered off down the steps. Boucard watched him go; hardly noticing the springy step, the straight, confident back.

In his office he read the message again. He put the slate down and stood staring through the window. Out there, he could see the desert stretching away towards the mountains. But it meant nothing.

The message was quite clear; de la Motte had gone back

on his word. He had countermanded his permission ; had forbidden the razzia. There it was in that round, schoolboy handwriting ; word for word just as it must have been dictated. He could feel the scar in his face twitching.

All at once, Boucard began to swear. The words came tumbling from his mouth ; a great welter of obscenity that sounded meaningless in the empty room. He clutched the table, with both hands, heaved it up as though about to overturn it. Then he let it fall back again so that its wooden legs met the stone flooring with a crash.

When he was calmer, he began to think. It was quite plain what de la Motte had meant. But de la Motte wasn't the only soldier in Africa. What was more, he wasn't here. He was in Oran, miles and miles away.

But even through his rage, Boucard realised how momentous was this decision. He tried to collect his thoughts, to recall the reasons which had made him so certain, so utterly sure. And gradually, as he grew quieter, they began to flood back ; logical, each one an overwhelming argument which could not possibly be ignored.

He got up and pulled out the map of the Duzair valley. But he did not need it and pushed it angrily away. All the time de la Motte's cold clear voice echoed in his brain like a stone dropped deep into a well. "No, by God," he said suddenly. He became aware of the silent room and began to pace up and down, striking out at the walls ; not noticing that he hurt his fingers.

* * * * *

Half an hour later, Boucard sent for the Signal Sergeant. He sat upright behind his table ; his face set in stern hard lines. The bearded Sergeant saluted and stood waiting at attention. Boucard eyed him carefully. He cleared his throat.

"How long have you been with me, Sergeant ?"

"Nine years, Colonel."

"Do you trust me ?"

"Trust you, Colonel ?" The bearded mouth opened in surprise.

"Yes, Sergeant, do you trust me? If I gave an order that might sound stupid, would you still obey it?"

"But of course, Colonel." The Sergeant was puzzled.

"You remember El Patan ti?" Boucard rapped out the words.

"But yes, Colonel. What a fight that was. I thought we'd never come out of it alive."

"But we did, eh?"

"Thanks to you, Colonel. You got us out." The man's face was alight with excitement.

"You'd follow me again, eh?"

"We'd follow you anywhere, Colonel."

"Anywhere at all?"

"Of course."

"That's what I wanted to know."

"Is that all, Colonel?"

"No, stay here. It's not all. I want you to help me."

"Me help you, Colonel?"

"Exactly. You know that message you gave me?"

The Sergeant nodded.

"I want no-one to know about it. No-one you understand. Have you spoken to anyone yet?"

"No, Colonel."

"Then don't. And see your men don't. Understand, this is something of great importance. I can't explain. I can only expect you to trust me. But you are to forget that message. Forget you ever got it." Poor devil, Boucard was thinking, what am I letting him in for?

"I understand, Colonel." The Sergeant's smile expressed relief. "I thought you were going to ask me to do something important," he said.

"This is important."

"But it's such a small thing."

"Small things are usually the most important." Boucard was aware that his hands were trembling. But his smile was firm and confident.

"This is between ourselves, Sergeant. A secret, you understand. I shall rely on you."

“Thank you, Colonel. I wish there was something better I could do for you.”

“Perhaps there will be,” Boucard said, “perhaps one day there will be.” He was conscious of the admiration, almost tenderness, in the Sergeant’s face and it hurt him.

CHAPTER 20

"**T**HERE they go, Lieutenant." Sergeant Coudin scratched his nose pensively and stared down into the cloud of dust rising beneath the walls. "There they go," he repeated, eyeing the long column of men and horses stretched out across the sand towards the foothills. In front there'd be the Chasseurs. He'd seen them early that morning, cocky as ever, riding off under Captain Piatte. Then came the Zouaves and then the hospital; stocky little mules carrying those familiar panniers so seldom empty after an action. He was hurt he should have been left here in the fort, and stared thoughtfully at the dust cloud flaring out around the marching men.

"Coudin, how many men have we in the fort?" Lebel had watched the last men leaving with a sinking heart. He could hear their boots; a heavy crunching in the sand. Delange was down there with the rearguard of Zouaves. They'd gone marching under the gateway only a moment ago.

"Forty-six men, sir. And one Zouave. Got a poisoned hand."

"You've arranged the sentry roster?" Lebel could feel Coudin's dislike, veiled but potent. Well, it can't hurt me here, he thought with relief. For once they'd given him a job that would not be a nightmare. He had almost wept when Zeller had told him. The thought of the razzia had kept him awake at nights.

"Yes, Lieutenant," Coudin said. "See—there's Lieutenant de Courcy joining the Zouaves. It'll be strange having those horse lines empty." He pointed to the troopers wheeling their horses; taking up a position well behind the marching men. Even from that distance, he could see how heavily laden they were. Like a harvest festival, he thought, seeing the bags of forage slung behind the saddles.

"Better shut the gates, Coudin." Now that the garrison was gone, Lebel was suddenly aware he was alone. For a moment, he had a wild desire to shout after the marching men,

moving slowly towards the Duzair valley. For a few hours a dust cloud would hang above the desert. And then they'd have vanished into the mountains ; without a sound or a sign. Perhaps, one morning, he'd hear the distant noise of musket fire and wonder what was happening. But, until they returned, he'd have no way of knowing. Nothing. He had to struggle to fight down the panic.

"You want them shut, Lieutenant ?" Coudin's voice was surprised. "They usually stay open all day," he said grudgingly.

"Well, shut them. Whilst I'm in command here, we'll take no chances." If Colonel Boucard could be ambushed, what might not happen here ?

"Very well, Lieutenant." Coudin saluted and began to walk along the parapet. When he came to the steps, he paused and took one last look at the column moving off towards the mountains. There they were ; tiny little figures moving slowly over the sand. Like ants, Coudin thought. Somewhere he had heard a story about ants carrying home an egg. But no, that must have been rats. Yes, rats. One of them lay on its back and held the egg whilst the others pulled it by its tail. Funny, he muttered. What was I thinking about ? Then the memory hit him. The infantry, plodding along with their boots sinking into the sand. Loaded with gear they'd be. He could almost feel it on his own shoulders. Food, ammunition, water, a musket ; a great pack stuffed with biscuits, packages of cartridges, dried meat and wrapped round with a rough blanket. Pouches bulging ; odd bags of stores that the mules couldn't carry slung round their necks. And, on top of that, the sun. Just rising and throwing its cruel heat down on their sweating bodies. All day, they'd be marching through that. Like an oven with the rocks just as though they'd been baked to a turn. And yet, he found himself sighing. That was where he belonged ; out there with the lads. Not shut up in this crackpot fort. He grunted with displeasure and began to descend the steps.

Lebel heard the gates closing with relief. The iron hinges shrieked in protest and then the heavy wooden bolts went thudding home. He looked again at the column in its shroud

of dust. Here and there he could see individual figures ; a trooper galloping away to the left ; a string of mules plodding stubbornly amidst the marching infantry. He took it all in without a thought for their discomfort. Then he became aware that the arms of the telegraph were clacking.

"It's nothing, Lieutenant. Just a routine acknowledgment," the Signal Sergeant said defensively. Lebel had caught him unprepared. He had hardly had time to get the slate behind his back.

"But there must be some message." Lebel's voice was high with annoyance. "I saw you writing something on your slate."

"Just routine, sir," the Sergeant said again, cursing himself for not having been quicker.

"Let me see." Lebel was determined to assert his authority.

"Perhaps it would be better not." The Sergeant knew he was going further than he should. But with this boy—there was a chance of getting away with it. He could feel the slate almost burning into his fingers.

"What do you mean?" Lebel was certain that the man was sneering at him.

"Nothing, sir."

"Then show me that slate. Look here—I mean what I say. Hand it over."

"Very well, Lieutenant." The Sergeant produced the slate. Bloody young fool, he thought, handing it reluctantly to Lebel. He watched his face with interest.

"In future, you'll bring every message to me immediately." Lebel began to read and then stopped, puzzled. He could not make head or tail of the message. Perhaps there was some mistake. But no—there were the words "Confirm acknowledgment of my order. Sent yesterday. Countermanding razzia. Repeat. Repeat most emphatically. Under no circumstances will a razzia be permitted."

"God," Lebel muttered. He felt suddenly frightened. This was something he did not understand. But it referred to another message. One that must have come yesterday. And there was the column, half-way to El Oud.

"The other message?" He was surprised at the authority in his voice. "Did you receive a message like this yesterday?"

"I don't know, sir."

"What do you mean, you don't know? You take all the messages here, don't you?"

"That's right, sir."

"Well, you must know. Did you get this message yesterday?"

"I couldn't say, Lieutenant." Despite his dismay, the Sergeant was fascinated by the working of the harelip.

"Sergeant, I warn you." Lebel was convinced that the man was hiding something. They are all conspiring against me, he thought, the panic coming back. "This is a matter for which you could be court-martialled and shot. If you don't tell me the truth, I'll put you under arrest."

"I can't tell you, sir, you'll have to ask the Colonel."

"The Colonel! Did he know about this?"

"You'll have to ask the Colonel," the Sergeant repeated stubbornly. He was growing frightened.

* * * * *

Riding at the head of the column, Colonel Boucard leant across and tapped Zeller on the shoulder.

"Look there," he said, smiling and pointing to the mountains. "Do you feel better now, Zeller?" He did not require an answer and so was unaware of the Commandant's expression.

"It's the best moment of my life," he said, "to know that we've begun—that there can be no turning back. You know, Zeller, I've often felt certain about my plans and seen them go wrong, but, this time, it's quite different, quite different," he repeated, staring at the mountains as though in a dream.

"You look happy, Colonel." Zeller's natural affection was struggling with his doubts. He repressed a desire to tell Boucard about his dream—in this state of mind it would be a sheer waste of breath. And besides, with the long column of blue-clad soldiers behind them, the strings of mules, the Chasseurs, every face so alert and confident, wasn't he himself

beginning to succumb to the intense excitement? The rows of faces, dust-stained but alive with purpose; the bursts of song, the boots, spurning the sand with a new alacrity.

"I suppose I am happy," Boucard was saying. "Do you remember, Zeller—that speech I made them before we started?" In his mind, he was recalling the rows of sunburnt faces, the sudden excitement and then the outbreaks of cheering with the caps and shakos flung high, "I meant every word of it," he said. "Oh, both of us are old soldiers and know what a few words can accomplish at the right moment. But this time I might have been one of them." He turned and gestured at the marching column. "I almost heard myself speaking—as though it were someone else. And I thought—that man's talking sense. He has something there. There are no empty promises but words straight from the heart. Am I right, Zeller?"

"Yes, Colonel. It was very moving."

"I felt like a boy," Boucard said. "Ridiculous, so free—and so sure."

Zeller nodded, not trusting himself to speak because, at that moment, his affection was so overpowering that he was afraid for the Colonel.

"I'm grateful to you, Zeller." Boucard had now completely forgotten the telegraph. "You've stood by me, you trust me. I promise you you'll have no cause for regret."

"Imagine riding back over this same stretch of ground," he went on. "Can you imagine how we shall feel? I've thought about it often. But no doubt it will seem natural enough."

"It will be when it's all over that we shall begin to realise. When we've handed over the Leopard to de la Motte, we'll be saying 'why didn't we keep him a little longer'—just so that we could remember what it was really like. I hope they'll treat him well, Zeller. He deserves it. I wouldn't like to think of him, insulted by men incapable of realising his worth."

"No doubt they will deal with him in their own way, Colonel." Zeller, despite himself, was beginning to believe Boucard.

"I doubt it," Boucard said; "it will be like chaining a lion in a circus tent."

"But that's what you've wanted to do, Colonel. You always speak about a cage."

"Yes," Boucard said, "but one uses words so easily."

"I don't suppose he would treat you in a very civilised manner?"

"I don't know. Between opponents there's always a sense of respect. That's why I don't like to think—those civilians who'll never understand what he has suffered." Boucard broke off suddenly.

"Well, Colonel, we'll worry about that when the time comes," Zeller said stolidly; "we have not caught him yet."

"A few more days," Boucard said eagerly.

"A lot can happen in that time."

"I'll keep his banner," Boucard said; "I'll take it back to France. They shall have it for the Emperor's tomb. There's a museum there, you know."

"I've never seen you so certain of any one thing before." Zeller was staring at Boucard. "It's like a man who believes—who really believes." He drew out a handkerchief and began to tie it over his mouth against the sand.

"You are a good friend, Zeller." Boucard had seen the gesture, knew the handkerchief was the Commandant's way of hiding his emotion.

"I told de la Motte something," he said, "in Oran. I told him that if I failed, I'd stay here—in this valley."

"You said that?" Zeller looked up in sudden alarm.

"I meant it," Boucard said. "If this expedition failed——" He was smiling.

"What a way to talk, Colonel." Zeller's eyes above the handkerchief were strained. He was suddenly aware of the weight of his equipment. In a desire to stop the Colonel saying any more, he snapped out:

"What's wrong with Audincourt?"

"Audincourt?" He asked permission to come with me up here."

"Well, he looks very odd. His eyes are staring as though he had fever." It was necessary to force his mind away from the mountains. Gripped by desperation, he went on:

"I'd rather have left him at Sagun, instead of Lebel."

"Lebel? Oh, he will do very well. Responsibility is a great teacher," Boucard said easily.

"But Audincourt——"

"He needs a change," Boucard said. "He begged me to take him with me." He was not really interested in Audincourt, his whole purpose centred on the mountains ahead.

"I'll have a word with him," Zeller said, knowing that he must get away from the Colonel. In some dreadful way, he felt a premonition, a certainty that they were marching to disaster. Boucard's easy reference to his death, the fixed way in which he stared ahead. Almost in a frenzy, he reined in and turned his horse, trotting back down the column. But Boucard hardly saw him go.

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Towards the end of the afternoon, he was able to see El Qud, standing out plainly in hard clear colours. Because he wished there to be no mistake, he rode forward, urging his horse so that its hooves threw up sprays of sand behind them. Now that the valley was so close, his mind seemed to take on a new certainty. Each movement was according to plan, every detail but a part of a methodical scheme of action. It had begun perfectly with the column marching away from the fort that morning: Now came the succeeding stage. One that he must watch carefully.

He found d'Auberon riding with the scouts and nodded briefly, staring towards the fort. As he had expected, there were signs of sudden activity. A trumpet call came drifting towards them across the intervening space. But as the trumpeter beside d'Auberon looked up for permission to sound an answering call, Boucard said "No" in a firm voice.

"The next time you hear a trumpet, it will be from that ridge." He pointed to the villages, black against the sky. He shook his fist theatrically in their direction and was aware that the troopers appreciated the gesture, understood his unspoken thoughts. In the gateway of the fort, he could see Lieutenant Jacquot hurrying out to meet them.

* * * * *

Half an hour later, he stood outside the fort with the officers

round him. El Oud had been cleaned and whitewashed, but he was angry with its atmosphere. "Ghosts," he thought. But didn't that apply to every fort in Africa?

"Gentlemen," he said, "I don't like this spot any more than you do. But I choose it for two reasons. Firstly, it has the best view. Secondly, it has bitter memories.

"Tomorrow we begin to wipe out those memories. But it's only the beginning; only the first stage. Now remember this. There's to be no firing tomorrow morning. You may get a few musket balls coming at you, but you are only to use the bayonet. You, Zeller, will take the left column; up that dried watercourse." He pointed to a deep, purple shadowed scar that ran slantwise across the mountain. "And, Hennessy, you'll take the gulley on the right. It'll be steep going, but you are a young man. You'll both start an hour before dawn. Do you want to ask any questions?"

"No, Colonel." Their faces were tranquil.

"Very well. Now listen carefully. Whatever happens, those villages are not to be fired. Any soldier who loses his head and tries to do so will be shot; immediately! It would endanger our chances. Bullets are one thing. The noise fades easily in these mountains. But smoke can be seen for miles. And the Duzair with the Leopard will be on the lookout. You all understand? We'll burn those villages on our way back. But tomorrow not one hut will be fired.

"When you get to the top of the ridge, you can sound your trumpets. And I want another sounded immediately you have cleared the track leading down into the valley. You'll be responsible for that, Zeller. As soon as I hear it, I'll come up myself with the Chasseurs and the field hospital. We'll spend the night on the ridge and push on the next day.

"Now one more point. We are standing here, outside El Oud. You know as well as I what happened here?" He listened to the low growl of reply. "Then need I say any more? You know why we are here. You know where we are going. Is that enough?"

"Yes, Colonel!" It was Jacquot's voice, boyish with excitement. He became aware of the faces round him and put up one hand towards his mouth in sudden embarrassment.

CHAPTER 21

THE assaulting columns began to move before dawn. The embers from many fires were still glowing as the soldiers fell in, dumping their packs in neat rows and slinging their muskets across their shoulders in readiness for the long climb ahead.

Zeller and Hennessy came for their final orders. It was difficult to see their faces which were tense and hard beneath a calm exterior. Boucard shook each one by the hand, wishing them good luck in a voice which he found hard to control. He found that his body was shaking violently and was grateful for the friendly darkness.

"Remember," he said again, "not a single hut is to be fired."

"No, Colonel." It was Hennessy's voice. "If you'll forgive me, sir, I'd like to get started. We have a long climb ahead and even though there are only a few old tribesmen waiting, they can be deadly with a gun."

"Yes, yes," Boucard said. "Sound your trumpet as soon as you reach the ridge."

"Yes, Colonel." Hennessy stepped back and saluted. Then he was gone, trudging away into the darkness. His voice sounded faintly from some distance away. There was the sudden noise of boots and then a muffled tramping as the column began to move.

"Zeller," Boucard said.

"Yes, Colonel."

"It's time you were off."

"Very well, Colonel."

"What's the matter man. Are you ill?"

"I'm in good health, Colonel Boucard, thank you, sir. With your permission, I'll move off."

"Yes, yes," Boucard said, disturbed by Zeller's obvious reluctance. If it were not utterly essential to stay, watching both columns, he would have gone himself. His determination to succeed made him sound harsh. "Good luck again, Zeller. You know how much this means."

"I shan't fail you, Colonel." Zeller was struggling with a desire to stay. There was something, some instinct. With a great effort, he controlled himself and saluted. But not until he was marching with the soldiers did he begin to feel better.

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When the columns were gone, Boucard began walking restlessly up and down. It would not be light for some hours and there was nothing, nothing that he could do. For a time, he must force himself to wait. But his sense of urgency had become so powerful that it was only with the utmost difficulty that he checked himself calling Gounod and ordering his horse. He could imagine the Zouaves beginning their climb in the darkness. The rocks that seemed to promise so firm a handhold, the loose scree that slipped treacherously away beneath their boots. When the dawn came, they would be nearing the ridge, soaking, exhausted, with their real work still before them. With his thoughts still preoccupied, he noticed Audincourt crouched over a dead fire.

"Not asleep, eh?" The words escaped before he began to resent this interruption of his solitude.

"No, Colonel." In the dim light, Audincourt appeared small and pathetic.

"What's the trouble. Excited about tomorrow?"

"Oh yes, I'm excited," Audincourt said quickly. And then, as if afraid to go on: "But I can't forget that Duzair."

"What Duzair?" Boucard was thinking of the next valley.

"Our Duzair, Colonel. Somehow—I'm almost ashamed to talk about it. He seems to have got inside me."

"Inside you?" Boucard's mind was still half absent.

"I've never met a man who could stand up to—to what we could do. But he did and it worried me because the whole machine appeared useless. We had everything, everything, but we couldn't break him. At least I couldn't. I know you wanted me to think I had."

"Oh, you realised that?" Boucard was listening now.

"Of course I did, Colonel. You let me suggest giving him gold. But it was something, something you must have done

to him whilst you were alone with him in the cell. I could see it in his eyes. He despised me, but he respected you."

"I don't wonder," Boucard said shortly.

"But what did you do, Colonel?"

"Threatened to castrate him. He knew I meant it."

"Oh." Audincourt was silent.

"So its troubling you, eh?"

"I can't explain it. Every time I sleep I see his eyes, staring at me."

"I see," Boucard said. "Well, there's a simple method of dealing with that. In two days' time, you'll see a lot of other eyes, equally fierce, just as full of contempt. Only this time, they'll be men who carry arms and they'll have one simple purpose—to kill you. Do you understand?"

"I think——" Audincourt began.

"Listen, my boy. There's nothing wrong with you. Nothing you won't get over. And this will help you. When the fighting begins, pick out each man who comes near you. Have a look at his eyes. You'll see just the same expression; just the same contempt as you did in that cell.

"There's your chance. This time you are on equal ground. It's up to you now, Audincourt. You can soon satisfy yourself as to which of you is superior. And remember, my boy, it's got to be you. Find a little contempt in your heart. You know why they look at you like that? Because they believe. But so do I and so must you. That's how men win battles."

"Yes, Colonel." Audincourt stood up straight. "I won't forget that," he said.

As soon as it began to grow light, Gounod brought the Colonel's horse. He helped him to mount, and stood silently by its head. Not far away the Chasseurs were saddling up and the stamp of hooves and mutter of voices came clearly through the cool air.

"Well, Colonel," Gounod said.

"What is it, Gounod?" Boucard was restless to get started, to canter across to the mastick trees where a clear view could be had of the mountains. But he controlled himself because Gounod had been strangely silent during the last days.

"I can't help it, Colonel Boucard. I don't like this business, but I wish you luck just the same."

"You do, you old crow," cried Boucard, suddenly pleased.

"It wouldn't be decent, not with us going into an action."

"You wait, Gounod. In forty-eight hours you'll realise I've been right all along. Just another forty-eight hours." His voice was thick with excitement.

"You'll need to be right, Colonel Boucard."

"What are you talking about, Gounod?"

"That message, sir."

"Gounod! How do you know?" Boucard felt a sudden chill. "Shut your mouth," he said savagely, leaning down from his saddle.

"At your orders, Colonel," Gounod said stolidly. He stared up at the Colonel.

"Look, Gounod"—already Boucard was regretting his anger—"I'm sorry," he said abruptly.

"You don't need to be sorry with me, sir. It was just that I wanted to get it off my chest. Now you can go on, sir; you know I don't hold nothing against you."

"Thank you, Gounod." So lonely did Boucard feel that the need for some human contact came on him with immense longing. He put out his hand.

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As the dawn came up, creeping over the mountain face, both columns were revealed—like ants, swarming vigorously across the rocks. Staring through his telescope, Boucard could pick out the figures, climbing, always climbing with a purpose that appeared remote, almost pathetic in that immense setting.

As the sun rose, its heat appeared to strike the mountains, chasing away the colours and penetrating with ruthless fingers into the gorges where the columns were climbing. Up there it must already be suffocatingly hot, choking with the dry, dead dust that would flare up around their scrabbling feet. Behind him, he could hear Piatte, pointing out each feature to d'Auberon. A string of words—"gullies, main track, Zeller's column"—passed without meaning into his

brain. He steadied the telescope, swung it to the right and found Hennessy's men still scrambling upward. Perhaps that figure at the top was Hennessy himself. Perhaps—he felt the thudding of his heart.

* * * * *

High up on the mountainside, Hennessy paused to wipe his streaming face. He was melting, literally melting and there was still some way to climb. How many hours ago had they started? He had no idea. It seemed endless, with only the desperate need to reach the top uppermost in his mind. Hanging onto a rock, he looked downward, catching sight of Jacquot, one of a string of soldiers, clinging like flies to the grey rock. With each effort, an arm would stretch out, a leg move convulsively. And then they were climbing again, edging a few feet higher towards the invisible villages which in any case they would never have been able to glimpse because of the streams of stinging moisture that cascaded into their eyes.

Somewhere down below, the Colonel would be watching. The sudden vision of that powerful face gave him fresh impetus and he pulled himself up higher.

Not far away, he could see a Sergeant climbing almost level with him. The man's face was a dull puce and his eyes seemed to be starting from his head. But he climbed on with a painful determination that roused an answering spirit in Hennessy. Up and up they went until he began to dream of water; great stone jugs which he could lift to his lips and then dash over his face. So tantalising was this vision that he began to swear, a stream of obscenity that was lost amidst the noise of strained breathing and rasping leather. He licked his cracked lips which were now covered with salt. And then painfully, slowly, went on again.

After another hour, he was in sight of the top. Already a few muskets had begun to torment the column, singing loudly above their heads or smacking amidst the rocks with unpleasantly viscous force. When he raised his head, he was unable to see the tribesmen. But the nearest village was quite plain; grim and silent in the scorching heat. As the

noise of firing became louder, he realised that Zeller's column must also be meeting opposition. This realisation cheered him. He was anxious to be first upon the ridge. Perhaps Zeller would be held up. He heard a cry and cursed quietly as a man below him fell headlong down the rocks.

When they were close enough, he assembled the men along a narrow stretch of rock just beneath the crest. Despite the musket balls which came more frequently, they sprawled there like newly landed fish, gasping and heaving until Hennessy could wait no longer.

"Fix your bayonets," he said, and his curt voice seemed to complete their recovery. Rapidly they began to unsling their muskets, tightening the slings and ramming in the long, cruel blades. Amidst their hungry faces, old and streaming with moisture, Lieutenant Jacquot appeared a small boy, wandered there by mistake from school. But he was examining his pistol with such a professional air, that Hennessy was forced to smile. Then he turned to the trumpeter who had crawled up beside him.

"Trumpeter," he said, "have you any breath left?"

The man's face was nearly purple, but he nodded determinedly.

"Then sound the charge," Hennessy said, delighted that this devilish business of climbing was over. He glanced along the line of expectant faces and was conscious of excitement stirring deeply in his stomach.

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Down below Boucard watched the figures scrambling over the rock. For a moment, they showed black on the skyline and then were gone amidst a faint popping of musket fire.

"Get your troopers mounted," he told d'Auberon curtly, feeling enormous relief. So it had been as he had expected. Only a handful of old men left to guard the villages. The firing was dying now; small, individual shots that sounded tiny on that vast expanse of mountainside. He was conscious that his heart was thumping harder than usual. But it would pass, it would pass. Now he must take the mule train up the mountain. But he still had to wait for the signal. Zeller

would clear out the villages before he swung round and opened up the track. This was the worst part, this waiting. Wherever you went, you waited. Even though you were a Marshal of France. You had to wait for the right moment and—once it came—exploit it to the full. That was the secret of war ; the right concentration at the right moment. They taught that in textbooks, but you had to learn it by experience just the same. He found himself thinking of young Jacquot the previous night. He was a good boy ; the real stuff the Army needed. But he would have to learn all the same. It was up to him to see that it did not come too harshly. I wish I were his age again, he kept thinking. The thought pursued him though he kept his eyes straining up the mountainside.

* * * * *

Zeller had forgotten all about his dream. His mouth was open and he was yelling with the Zouaves as they charged in on the village. Behind them five or six elderly Duzair were left crumpled amongst the rocks, hands still clinging to the ancient muskets with which they had tried to ward off the bayonet thrusts.

He could see the village looming up as he ran ; an ugly jumble of thatched huts that bobbed up and down in the heat. It seemed jammed with white-robed men, but he realised that these must be the women, running frantically from the open doorways. When he paused for breath, he could hear a shrill screaming. There were children too ; and hens and sheep all mixed up.

The line of men came doubling onward ; a jagged wave of colour ; the long bayonets protruding from their muskets like cruel steel spikes. When they saw what they had to deal with, the shouting stopped. They covered the last yards as runners finishing an exhausting race ; their faces almost purple in the heat, eyes glittering wildly in drawn, bearded faces.

“Drive them out,” Zeller shouted, “get them away from the huts.” He knocked away a Duzair woman who had run into him in her panic. “Get off,” he cried, seeing her terrified face ; realising that so swift had been their attack

that these women had not even had time to cover their faces with ash.

The Zouaves drove the women and children out of the village, herding them past the evil-smelling huts and making them sit down on a bare patch of earth. Already the wailing had begun ; dull and raucous at first, but growing now into a high and piercing keening. They were tearing their clothes, grubbing handfuls of dirt from the hard ground to smear their faces. What filthy creatures, Zeller thought. He remembered what had happened to prisoners—handed over to such women for sport by the tribesmen. The thought disgusted him. He turned back to the village.

It was then he noticed a sliver of flame running up one side of a hut. " Oh, Jesus," he shouted, frozen suddenly with horror. For a moment he was unable to move. Then a second sheet of flame licked from the doorway of a neighbouring hut. The sight galvanised him and he ran forward, shouting. " Put it out, put it out." His voice hoarse with fear. He was holding his sword and jabbed vainly in the direction of the burning huts.

" There he is." It was the Sergeant Major who dashed past ; racing after a figure slipping quickly behind a hut.

" There he is," Zeller repeated, running all the faster. But he could not keep up with the Sergeant Major who moved like a man possessed. As he ran, Zeller heard the roaring of the flames. " Oh God," he said aloud, trying to fight back the panic.

Behind the hut, he found the Sergeant Major rolling with an Arab on the ground. The Zouave's face was distorted. He grappled with the Duzair, wrenched him on his back and put his knee in the man's stomach. Then, rising, he seized his musket and drove its bayonet through the Duzair's chest, using his foot to wrench it out, raising the musket and pausing before driving it deep once more into the writhing body.

" It was him," he said when he was able to speak. He pointed to a crude torch which lay spluttering on the ground. " Look what he has done," he said, still holding the musket and waving its stained bayonet.

As he looked at the blazing thatch, Zeller knew that no

power on earth could put out those flames. The dry wood had taken the torch like tinder and three huts were a mass of deep red flame. Great oily gusts of black smoke poured up into the clear sky. Even as he watched, a corner of thatched roof collapsed, throwing out a shower of sparks. Borne on a wind conjured from nowhere, they blew like fire-flies, landing upon a neighbouring thatched roof ; smoking for a few seconds until they burst suddenly into little ripples of flame.

"Oh God." Zeller was at an utter loss for words. Oblivious now of the smoke that was beginning to whirl round him, he stared from the Sergeant Major to the dying Duzair ; torn between his fear and a hatred for this old, bearded tribesman who, in the moment of defeat had snatched a victory out of their hands.

* * * * *

Boucard saw the smoke within the next few minutes. It began slowly, a thin grey haze drifting gently over the top of the mountain. At first, he imagined it must be a cloud. But, as it grew thicker he knew there could be no mistake. He felt a coldness at the bottom of his spine which mounted slowly until it invaded his body.

No one spoke. It was quite silent ; the whole valley flattened under the enormous heat. The air was thin and shimmery and the smoke caused it to dance violently as it floated over the mountainside and drifted down towards the valley.

As he watched, Boucard felt the first stirrings of fear ; like a little animal somewhere near his heart. He would have liked to believe that this was something that was not happening ; that he was experiencing a bad dream. But he was too old for self-deception. He had to believe his eyes. That was smoke drifting into the valley. Smoke could only come from a burning village. Someone had disobeyed his orders.

He knew immediately that there was one thing he should do. He must turn back and march his column down to Sagun. It was the only logical outcome. That smoke was a warning shouted across the mountains. His instincts told

him that to go on now would be madness. Yet he hesitated and was reluctant to make up his mind.

Because—was there not a chance ; just a possibility ? Such things ' had been known before ; there was always an unforeseen element ; a moment when someone did not notice. But common sense drove him back on his first reasoning. He knew he ought to go back ; that some callous idiot had ruined his plan ; had brought his cherished ambition crashing down around his ears ; had given him a life sentence—a broken old man with a few medals in a world that would not understand.

If he could have wept, Boucard would have done so. But he had lost the capacity fifty years before and his grief was like a slow fire that consumed him from inside. He sat quietly on his horse, never taking his eyes from the smoke. But his brain felt as though some shattering convulsion were taking place. He had temporarily lost the power to think. He sat quite silent whilst Piatte and d'Auberon looked at him without speaking.

After a time, they heard the trumpet notes floating down from the head of the track. At first Boucard hardly realised what it meant, but gradually it dawned on him that he must make a decision. The only thing to do was to sound the recall. Then Zeller and Hennessy would be forced to come down. But could he do that ? Could he break this news ? A sly voice urged him to remember morale ; you couldn't keep a garrison fighting on promises. But in reality that meant nothing ; everything depended on the personality of its commander. He had the strength of will to march back. But did he intend to do so ?

The image of the Leopard was torturing him ; thoughts of one fruitless campaign after another. He remembered the mutilated bodies, the glaring heat at the end of a long march, the endless days locked up in a succession of forts, the desperate chases into the mountains, a long chain of negative reports—" I have to inform you, sir, that the Leopard has unfortunately eluded us " ; or " We took ninety prisoners but the Leopard was not amongst them."

My God, he thought. He has cheated me again. And then the vast misery of Africa seemed to boil over in his brain.

He was swept in a blinding fury that shook and consumed him. He could feel the fury tearing him ; gripping with a palsy as though the roof of his head were being prised off. He was conscious he was swearing ; that Piatte and d'Auberon were staring at him with startled faces. But he was beyond caring ; beyond controlling himself. He thought suddenly of the telegraph and wished he could rip it into pieces. It was that damned machine that had cheated him ; in his fury he had forgotten the smoke. And he was not going to be cheated ; not with the Leopard just inside the net. How had he dared to think of turning back ; the idea was madness, throwing away the best chance of a lifetime. He would go on. They would all go on. He shouted in a loud, unnatural voice that brought the troopers into galvanised action.

"Go on." His voice was harsh and rasping. "What are you waiting for ?" The sight of the officers' faces only infuriated him. "Get moving," he yelled in a blinding fury. "Start up the track."

He dug his feet viciously into his horse's side, being almost thrown out of the saddle as the startled animal leapt forward.

CHAPTER 22

LONG before he had led his horse up the final stretch, Boucard's senses had returned. At the top, he met Zeller whose strained face showed how desperately he feared an outburst of reproach. But Boucard said nothing.

"It was an Arab," Zeller said. "He was running with a lighted torch. The flames were up the thatch before we could kill him." He was sweating with anxiety; and the memory of his dream was troubling him.

"It's done now," was all Boucard said. He glanced down at the column of men and horses winding its way up from the valley floor. Like a many-limbed caterpillar, the line straggled across the mountainside. The troopers had dismounted and were leading their horses. In the middle was the field hospital.

"You know what this means, don't you?" he said.

"Surely not——" Even Zeller was surprised. "You don't mean, Colonel, that we ought to turn back!"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"But you can't do it, Colonel. Not after coming all this way. You'll break their hearts." Zeller's face was pathetic.

"Better than being cut to pieces," Boucard said sadly. Zeller's dismayed face gave him the impression that he was now part of a machine; a machine that was moving slowly forward out of control—which should have been checked at the bottom of the valley; would have been, but for a moment of blindness.

"It's no use blinding ourselves," he said. "I should never have come up here. I blame myself. But now it's happened we must hold a council of war. It's up to every officer to say whether he wishes to go on."

"Yes, Colonel." Zeller stared at him curiously. Could Colonel Boucard be losing heart, he thought. Was it the heat and the sudden rage over that smoke? He had never seen the Colonel so quiet. It puzzled and frightened him. What a tirade he had expected. He did not understand.

"As soon as the column comes up, tell the officers I want to see them. And post sentries, Zeller, double sentries, everywhere. Push them well out so that we get plenty of warning."

"Yes, Colonel. By the way, there's plenty of meat. Several hundred sheep, thirty oxen and a few horses. I've got a detail slaughtering them."

"Good," Boucard said automatically, "give the men all the meat they can carry. And, Zeller, what about those women?" He had only just become aware of the unpleasant wailing and the sound irritated and disturbed him.

"I've penned them in, sir. I'm afraid that noise will go on though. You might as well try to stop a pig squealing whilst its throat is being cut."

"Do what you can," Boucard said abstractedly. He was already imagining the voices that would reproach him. He felt old and disinclined to argue; tired so that he craved a place amongst the rocks where he could lie down and sleep. His body was weighted and numb, his brain only half stirring. But I've got to explain, he thought, seeing the first troopers coming over the ridge, leading their horses; gasping and sweating from the long, stiff climb.

* * * * *

"Gentlemen," Boucard said when all the officers were listening. "I have called this council because we are in acute danger." He paused to see how they were taking it, but their faces only expressed a vague puzzlement. "That smoke was fatal. It gave our position away. In a matter of days, perhaps hours, the Leopard will know of our presence. He'll be able to choose his time and lie in ambush as we march. He may even attack us in the open. As you know, I'd hoped to catch him by surprise. But I'm certain now that that is no longer possible. With that knowledge, it's suicide to stay here and I tell you frankly, had I not been so anxious to catch him, I would have brought you back to El Oud hours ago.

"But I failed to do that." Boucard's voice became more powerful. "I failed because I over-rode my own judgement. Any commander is liable to make that mistake, and I've done it today. In other words, I've put you in a dangerous position.

And so I must give you every chance to state your own opinions. It's an old custom, this council of war ; the Romans used it and the Greeks before them. Every officer has the right to speak. But I maintain the casting vote."

"Colonel"—it was Zeller—"what sort of force do you think the Leopard has got?"

"Three or four thousand men. A couple of battalions of regulars and the rest tribesmen."

"And we are nearly three hundred." It was Piatte who had broken in.

"Go on, Zeller."

"Frankly, Colonel, I've never liked this expedition. I had a feeling from the start. It was one night——" Zeller paused, the dream was nagging. But he could not talk about it ; not out here with this crowd of expectant faces. He shuddered and forced himself to go on talking. "But one's personal feelings have little to do with it. I agree about the smoke. But our men are magnificent. You couldn't find better in Africa. It seems a pity to deprive them of this chance. I agree it looks dangerous, but doesn't any decision in war? Three or four thousand tribesmen are not a lot to take on, Colonel—not with soldiers of our calibre." He was surprised to find himself talking with such enthusiasm, but the pent-up longing forced him on. "Why not risk it, Colonel? Push on a little. If it looks bad, we can still turn back. But to retire now, before we have fired a shot, seems over cautious. I think we should go on."

"That's your considered opinion?"

"It is, Colonel."

"Hennessy—what are your ideas?"

"I'd like to go on too, Colonel. I see the risk but we are strong enough to deal with it. Besides, think of all those months cooped up in Sagun. I don't think I could stand going back—not without hearing a shot fired." Hennessy's face was serious. "If we have got as far as this we ought to go on," he said ; "we are playing for big stakes, we have to gamble."

"Audincourt?"

"Go on, Colonel." Audincourt could not bear the thought

of turning back. "We can deal with them," he cried ; "they may outnumber us, but half of them will never have fought in a big action before. Besides, remember the idea behind all this. It was you who wanted to capture the Leopard. You who put it in our minds. I say go on," he was almost shouting. "Of course there's a risk, but when have Frenchmen thought that a disadvantage?"

"D'Auberon?"

"Colonel——" D'Auberon had meant to be cautious. He remembered Boucard's face in the valley ; the dreadful stream of obscenities as the smoke came drifting over the ridge. He trusted the Colonel's judgement ; knew he was, seldom wrong. But the current of excitement had caught him ; like an intoxication. He felt it in the excited faces and quick breathing ; the hammering inside him. "I vote to go on," he said.

"Piatte?"

"Push on, Colonel. This is no ordinary razzia. Remember the purpose you've spoken about so many times. This campaign is like a crusade. If we turn back, we are ruined. We shall never be able to look ourselves in the face. And remember Brosset. Remember all the men the Arabs have killed. You can't go back now, Colonel Boucard. You can't," he cried, staring in Boucard's face, like a man who could not comprehend his master.

"Delange?" Boucard could feel the pain ; the biting shame that would haunt him.

"Push on, Colonel. We can beat any number of tribesmen." The voice was young, determined. Oh God, Boucard thought.

"Crespin?"

"I say the same, sir. We've come all the way up here after the Leopard. We can't turn back and it's not as though we don't know our trade."

"Arnauld?"

"Go on, Colonel. We all have to take risks. This is no worse than any other. Besides, look what we stand to gain."

"De Coufey?"

"Go on, Colonel."

“Jacquot?”

“I too, Colonel”—that clear, childish voice. “This is bigger than ourselves. This is for France. I haven’t forgotten what you told us last night outside El Oud. I was thinking of it—every moment I was climbing up the mountain.”

“Very well,” Boucard said slowly, knowing he must destroy their trust, in another moment shatter their enthusiasm, give them a weapon with which they would reproach him. But it did not do to think like that. His instincts told him he was utterly right. What was more, he must obey them, without question, without any other thought.

“I see you are all agreed.” The words came slowly, with great difficulty. “And were I a younger man, I should agree with you too. But I’m an old man, and I know Africa better than I know myself. I tell you that to go on would be suicide. It would be worse than that. It would be sending you to your deaths.

“Remember, I told you I had the casting vote. It would be madness to go on and I won’t allow it. Oh I know”—he was staring at the incredulous faces—“I know what is in your minds. That’s something I have to bear,” he cried in a rasping voice, “but I’ll bear it willingly rather than be responsible for a disaster. Listen,” he went on, aware of the dead silence, “you may think me an old man who has lost his nerve. Nothing could be less true. There’s a time for courage, a time for taking risks. But that moment has slipped past. It went with the tribesman who fired those huts. When you’ve soldiered longer, you’ll understand what I mean. You’ll understand why I’ve had to make this decision. And I hope”—they had to strain now to hear him—“I hope you’ll be wise enough not to blame me. I could do nothing else.” He was almost talking to himself and had to choke back the words.

“So now”—he was making a great effort—“here are my orders. We camp here tonight, with double sentries. In the morning, we go down into the valley; the hospital and the Chasseurs first. You, Hennessy, will take the rearguard. That’s all, gentlemen. That’s all I have to say.”

For a moment, it seemed as though they were about to speak. He watched their faces, the mouths drawn in, the eyes bewildered or burning with contempt. Then, quietly, they began to move away, breaking up into little groups, walking in silence until they were almost out of earshot, when they began to talk ; at first in short, stunned sentences and then in fiercer voices. They moved away as though glad to be rid of something they did not understand. And watching them, Boucard felt a deep and bitter pain.

CHAPTER 23

THE troopers were busy with their horses as Piatte rose from his knees. From nearby came a deep and persistent coughing as the infantrymen reluctantly left their blankets, crawling out into a world already smarting from the sun.

The hands of his watch pointed to five o'clock and he gazed at the two cherubs which ornamented its face. A present from his mother—and here—hundreds of soldiers, making ready to retreat. An hour ago, he would have burned with resentment. But now he smiled calmly and began to walk towards the horse lines.

When he had first knelt down, the dawn had seemed infinitely remote. But as the familiar words came silently to his lips, the growing light had crept closer, changing miraculously from colour to colour until now the hot sunshine revealed the blackened ruins of the village only a hundred yards away.

Piatte also felt burnt out, but now he was calm; the anger had gone, giving place to resignation, even sympathy for the Colonel whose dilemma he was able to understand. One was born into the world to suffer and was this not just one fresh demand exacting courage and resignation.

He stood stock-still to listen, the thoughts still running in his head. But the noise was unmistakable. First one and then a whole succession of shots from the sentry posts. He began to run hurriedly to where the horses were waiting.

As he ran, the noise grew louder, mingling with shouts of alarm and the sudden flurry of feet. Everywhere, soldiers were starting up, snatching at muskets, struggling with their boots. As he dashed through the lines of tethered mules in the field hospital, they set up a harsh braying. A man cannoned into him and ran off cursing. Almost knocked off his balance, Piatte experienced a sudden wild alarm. He ran all the faster whilst around him the whole camp rose to startled life.

Reaching the horse lines, he found d'Auberon and de Courcy already mounted, whilst around them troopers were still tightening straps, jumping up into their saddles and

staring in the direction of the firing. Piatte pushed his foot into the stirrup, swung himself up and felt instantly reassured in the familiar position. Shading his eyes, he looked across to where the firing was now a consistent crashing. For a moment, he could not believe his eyes, but then his lips drew down in a line and he shouted an order to the troopers.

Almost immediately, they began to move, breaking into a trot and forcing their way through a mass of hurrying soldiers who stared up alarmed and then dodged clear. It was then that Piatte caught sight of Colonel Boucard and, shouting to the squadron to go on, he cantered up beside him, pulling up his horse so fiercely that she neighed, protesting.

"It's you, Piatte." There was no sign of despair on Boucard's face. "You know your job," he shouted above the noise; "get out in front and hold them as long as you can. There's no infantry there, only horsemen. But hold them." He jabbed his fingers towards the firing. "Give me fifteen minutes and I'll have a firing line. You can fall back behind me."

Piatte nodded and raised his hand to the salute. He caught a last glimpse of the Colonel's face, fierce and unperturbed. Then he pushed Cerise into a gallop, and overtook the squadron. He could see the Arabs clearly; a ragged line of horsemen racing towards the sentries. He signalled to the squadron to assume its battle formation; himself and de Courcy in front, d'Auberon with the second line. How often had they rehearsed this, manœuvring within sight of Sagun. His brain felt brilliantly clear, assured of success.

Half a mile in front the tribesmen came so swiftly, shouting their strange cries that the men in the outposts had little chance. Though many Arabs went down, pitching over their horses heads or dropping, rolling out of their saddles, the rest passed like a flock of birds over the set traps, engulfing and hacking; pausing momentarily, whilst the swords rose and fell, before surging onwards. Amidst them, banners rose and tossed like corks on a white sea. As they saw the Chasseurs riding to meet them, a fanatical howling rose up.

Instinctively they had sensed the tactics of the Roumi horsemen who would attempt to check them whilst the infantry

fled away. But behind the troopers, they could see the confusion in the camp, were aware of the terror their sudden appearance had created. The mules and men were a rich prize eagerly sought. They shouted again and rode in a great mass towards the flank of the Roumi cavalry.

Piatte saw them and signalled the squadron to wheel left. There was no need to see whether his order had been obeyed. He was conscious the whole squadron was moving as a machine, with precision and the utter confidence born of long experience. He was hardly aware of the weight of the sabre in his hand. He judged the exact spot where they would strike the tribesmen, could calculate the disciplined weight that would tear and break them into little groups of horsemen. As the distance between them narrowed, he began to pick out individual faces ; a big man with a curling beard who rode a grey horse. Through the clouds of dust, he saw the sunlight glinting on steel but was hardly aware of the shouting. He settled himself firmly in the saddle, was conscious of the steady, rhythmic pounding as Cerise drew closer. For an instant he wondered how d'Auberon was taking it, but then the Arab claimed all his attention. He saw the spot where he was going to put his sword point ; judged the exact distance.

As the Roumi troopers rode towards them, the Arabs reluctantly swung round, balked of their purpose and angry at the delay. But their momentum had been lost. So that when the two lines met, they felt the sudden weight and gave way despite their fierceness.

In the midst of the swirling dust, Piatte was swinging his sabre with some difficulty. The Arab had gone down, pierced through the throat, but now a sea of faces appeared all round him. Somewhere he was conscious that horses were screaming. He heard the frantic shouting, saw a mare rear up, toppling on hind legs. Then a sword slashed down on him, ripping the sleeve right down the length of one arm. He turned, feeling no pain and hacked at his opponents neck, saw the mouth open, the gap spurting blood where his sabre had been an instant ago. Then he was on, carried forward by Cerise's momentum. And after him came a line of troopers, hacking and stabbing, their horses shouldering

through the smaller Arab mounts, jolting them aside, until they were out into the sunlight beyond and moving forward.

Still dazed with the noise and exertion, Piatte could hardly believe what he now saw. He could have sworn that they had not been there before. But—it was no hallucination—a second line of tribesmen was galloping to meet them. He realised suddenly that he had miscalculated, but there was nothing else he could have done. The Arabs behind would turn and come after them and they would be caught, sandwiched between two lines of limitless yelling tribesmen.

He looked behind him at the depleted line of troopers. De Courcy was missing. But there was d'Auberon just emerging, from the tangled mass of men and horses. As he watched, the remainder of the squadron came out, still a compact line, leaving the Arabs milling aimlessly behind them.

Even as he rode, he could sense that Cerise was slowing. He looked at the advancing line again and thought desperately. But there was no other way, no possible course but to go through them. And with this knowledge, he grew suddenly calm. He would do his utmost—and what man could do more? There was no thought of regret in his mind as he signalled urgently to his men to close up.

The second line of tribesmen had heard the shouting and the thunderous impact and had ridden straight towards the dust cloud. Travelling at great speed, they knew the keen exultation of men who not for one instant doubted victory. They saw the blue coats of the Roumi coming slowly to meet them, saw their horses already weary and swept down on them, shouting and half intoxicated with the knowledge that these Roumi horsemen were now in their power. Their Caid's raced ahead, and the tribesmen followed in a long white torrent that burst like a curling wave onto the French cavalry, enveloping them so that soon both men and horses were lost in the dust which rose in choking clouds.

Inside the dust cloud, Piatte knew with certainty that this time they were not going through. Even the horses felt it, struggling and fighting for foothold whilst above them their riders cut and slashed and exchanged pistol shots. But the weight was too great. Reluctantly, the horses were borne

back ; the troopers struggling, and shouting encouragement, though each seemed lost in a private world where dark-skinned faces bobbed all round them and the swords rose and fell in a fantastic pattern of glinting steel.

Piatte was conscious that a great weight was crushing him. His legs seemed pinned to the saddle and would not obey him as he bent desperately to avoid a blow. Then a bearded face loomed up, a hand clutched at his shoulder. He pulled his sabre back, thrust it like a billiard cue and felt the hand relax. Next moment his sword was gone, leaving only a dull pain in his arm. He wrenched his pistol from the saddle holster and emptied it into another face, then seized it by the barrel and used it as a club. As he fought, he wondered what had happened to d'Auberon. But then a great weight appeared to strike him in the chest. Reluctantly, he became aware that he was slipping out of his saddle. He tried to clutch the reins but they moved like water in his fingers. . . .

* * * * *

Behind the rocks, Boucard was watching ; his men sheltering behind a mass of boulders which littered the crest near the village. Far down below, El Oud lay dormant under the sun's heat. Even here it felt as though the rocks were about to smoke. Boucard licked his lips and stared where the dust was flaring up. Beside him Zeller was crouching with a set calm face.

"It will be our turn now," Boucard muttered, wishing that the dust would clear.

"But we'll beat them back, Colonel. We won't have any trouble." For once Zeller seemed almost to be enjoying himself, his expression tranquil and undisturbed.

"We shall have trouble," Boucard said. "Don't underestimate them, Zeller. They'll cling to us, like the first bees in a swarm. Those are only the horsemen, their infantry must be marching now. They'll try and pin us here until the regular battalions come up."

"Look, Colonel." Zeller was pointing to a sudden break in the dust cloud. Out of it moved vague shapes, small and confused but becoming recognizable as troopers, galloping desperately towards the village. For a moment it seemed as

though the tribesmen, obscured in the drifting dust, had failed to notice. Then a loud shout went up and, as though a curtain had been rolled back, a mass of white-clad horsemen came following in pursuit.

"Nine," Boucard said briefly. He watched the soldiers flying like straws on a wind.

"That's d'Auberon." Zeller had got to his feet, a musket clutched in one hand.

"Wait another minute, then start picking the Arabs off," Boucard shouted. He waited, conscious of a tightness in his chest.

Suddenly the muskets began to speak, loud and imperative in the hot air. An Arab fell off his horse and then, a moment later, another horse and rider turned a great cartwheel, crashing onto the ground. A cheer went up from behind the rocks. Boucard could see d'Auberon clearly ; bent over his horse, his face a white splodge, bobbing up and down. And then, as if in sudden agreement, the tribesmen checked their horses and turned back towards the noise of shouting where the Arabs still surged together in a chaotic mass, looting the bodies and exulting in their own fierce fashion.

D'Auberon and his men rode in amidst the rocks, moving so fast that the Zouaves were forced to spring up, seizing the horses by the bridles to prevent them careering on down the mountainside. The breathing of the horses sounded like bellows and white sprays of foam flecked the Zouaves face as they stared up at the troopers still hanging in their saddles. Then d'Auberon got down with a drawn face, feeling himself carefully all over, incredulous he was not wounded. When he was satisfied, he seemed suddenly to come to himself. His eyes resumed their normal expression and he began to walk towards the Colonel.

"Thank you," Boucard said, "thank you, d'Auberon. You'd better get a musket now. Take your horses down the mountain a little way, we may need them for the wounded." He was looking towards the tribesmen who seemed now to have coalesced into one great line and were moving slowly, but with gathering speed, towards the hastily improvised garrison amongst the rocks.

TOWARDS evening, Colonel Boucard lay staring out across a stretch of ground dotted with silent white bundles. He lay quite still, grateful for the comparative silence that was broken only by an occasional musket shot. In the tremendous heat, he found it difficult to think, but slowly, a plan was forming in his mind.

After a few minutes, he began to crawl painfully from rock to rock, edging his way round the dead Zouaves until he came on Zeller who had a piece of paper in his hand.

"What have you got there?" he asked, looking with surprise at the grimy face.

"My report, Colonel Boucard. Here, come in behind the rock. Those negro sharpshooters are making life extraordinarily uncomfortable."

"Ha," Boucard said, edging in and recalling the moment that afternoon when he had seen the red fezzes arriving. The tribesmen had set up such welcoming shouts that the soldiers had felt compelled to answer them with yells of derision.

"I've been all round the perimeter," Zeller said quietly. "Arnauld was killed in the first attack and Crespin was shot in the head when the regulars got into the field ambulance."

"Dead?" Boucard asked. It was unpleasant to recall that last assault. The Leopard had thrown in his infantry and had almost cut them in two. He could still hear the cries of the wounded as the tribesmen had finished them off. That and the frantic braying of the mules, dragged back amidst a shower of bullets, kicking and struggling at the hands of their captors and collapsing grotesquely as the Zouaves fired at random into the confusion of men and animals.

"No, not dead," Zeller said, "but very badly wounded."

"And how many men?" Boucard jerked his head at the paper in Zeller's hand.

"About one hundred, Colonel. Nearly all the wounded were murdered when——" Even now he was methodically ticking off the numbers with a stub of pencil.

"Counting the Chasseurs?"

"No, Colonel. I didn't count them."

"What about ammunition?"

"Still good, Colonel. We brought plenty with us and the men have been able to replenish their supplies from the casualties. But it's the water I'm worried about." He licked the pencil stub.

"Are you thirsty," Boucard asked. He unhooked his water bottle and passed it across. "Go on, drink," he said, pleased at Zeller's expression at finding it full.

"But, Colonel—you must drink."

"I don't feel like it." Boucard was staring at the open ground. It was amazing how they had vanished, like moles sunk into the earth. Yet there must be thousands; propped behind rocks, sheltering in the gullies. He wondered suddenly where the Leopard was hidden.

"Did you see the green banner?" he asked, not noticing the tantalising gurgle of water.

"Yes, Colonel." Zeller stuck back the cork and wiped his lips carefully. "I saw it during the second attack," he said.

"So did I."

"I'm sorry, Colonel. I know how you must feel. I keep on blaming myself—those huts!"

"Spare your pity," Boucard said quietly. "You know, just this morning—when those horsemen appeared—I began to feel—— But its no good complaining," he said briskly. "I had time enough to consider things last night. Now there's only one thing that's important."

"What's that?"

"To get back to Sagun."

"But, Colonel, there's no chance." Zeller had accepted the inevitable necessity to die somewhere along this strip of hot rock and Boucard's confident voice upset him. Slowly he handed back the water bottle.

"Don't be ridiculous. There's always a chance and this happens to be a good one. Those Arabs will be disappointed. They've lost heavily—look at those bodies out there.

"When night comes they will lick their wounds and start muttering. You know how they argue. But there's one

thing they won't squabble about and that's us. However dispirited they may be, they'll still expect to find us here when the sun comes up."

"And you think——" Instinctively Zeller's eyes went to the valley below.

"I don't think, Zeller, I know. We shall none of us be here tomorrow. Oh—I know it's difficult, but that's no reason why we should not carry it out. I've got it all planned, here, in my head."

"But when we get to the bottom?"

"El Oud, man. There's water there and we shall be behind walls. We can hold out for days whilst d'Auberon goes down to Sagun. Probably Lebel has sent a message already. He must have heard the noise."

"He must have heard it," Zeller repeated.

"Of course he has. Now get Hennessy. I want him to do the rearguard."

When Hennessy came crawling towards the Colonel, he was astonished to find him in such good spirits. He had expected a tired, dispirited old man, but Boucard was almost jaunty.

"I want you to stay here with twenty Zouaves, Hennessy, until the rest of us are well on our way down there." He pointed to El Oud which, in the sunset, had become a kind of mirage, a Mecca which held out hopes of eternity.

"Yes, sir"

"We'll go in two columns. Audincourt and d'Auberon will take the wounded down the track. He has three horses left, I believe, so they'll need men to carry the wounded. You and I, Zeller, will go down that gorge you came up yesterday. And you, Hennessy, after opening a brisk fire to keep those Arabs busy, will slip down after us as soon as you are sure we are well on our way. Don't rush it, my boy. Let us get well clear. Just use your own judgement."

"Yes, Colonel." Hennessy nodded. "Do you mind if I say something?" he asked.

"What is it?" Boucard looked at him curiously.

"I'd like to apologise, Colonel. You were right about not going on. I ought to have known yesterday."

"Thank you," Boucard said, smiling; "thank you very much. But I'm not always right."

"You will be this time, sir." Hennessy's smile was charming beneath the dirt and Boucard felt disturbed and angry with himself because the young man had no inkling of the events which had brought him here. It's the same with Piatte and de Courcy and Arnould, he thought, and young Crespín too. He felt suddenly tired and old.

"Go along, Hennessy," he said. "I'll be round to look at your positions when the sun goes down."

When Hennessy had gone, Zeller edged closer to the Colonel. There was plainly something he was anxious to say, and Boucard let him talk, glancing occasionally towards the positions where the Arabs were hidden.

"It may sound curious, telling you this now," Zeller was saying. "But I had a dream before we came on this expedition. You know, my mother and I——"

"Your mother, yes."

"I dreamt she was talking to me, warning me not to come with you. It was so vivid, I still believe it. There was no doubt at all." He was eyeing the Colonel, nervous of sudden scorn.

"She warned you not to come, eh?" Boucard stopped watching the rocks, hardly noticing a musket ball that sang somewhere above his head. "She did?"

"I felt that I should have told you. Not that it would have made any difference of course. But it's been troubling me. And now we are here—well, I feel happier it's out. You don't think me absurd?"

"No," Boucard said, "I don't think it's absurd. But it would not have made any difference."

"You had your heart in this expedition, didn't you, Colonel?"

"Of course I was set on it," Boucard said; "it was the only thing that made my life seem worth while. Like a star, hanging in the sky. I'd set my heart on it. But it's over now, Zeller—all over; just an unfortunate page of history that will be conveniently forgotten. And I'm finished too. No—don't look like that. You know it's true."

"But when you do get back, remember, you came because you were ordered. I want you to say you knew absolutely nothing about it. You just marched because you had no alternative."

"But, Colohel, I can't lie when I agreed with everything you did. I can't." Zeller raised his grimy face. "Besides, you'll be there yourself. And how could I ever lie in front of you?"

"It won't be necessary," Boucard said and was grateful for the expression of uncomprehending affection in Zeller's eyes.

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As soon as darkness settled over the mountains, Boucard began to organize the descent. He sent d'Auberon first with Audincourt, muffling the horses' hooves with rags torn from the dead soldiers' uniforms. Across the saddles, they loaded the worst of the wounded whilst the others were carried in makeshift stretchers fashioned from muskets with tunics tightly bound across.

Only when they were gone and there was still no sound from the Arab lines, did Boucard begin to breathe freely. He hurried along to where the Zouaves were mustering, shadowy figures that emerged from amidst the rocks, and began to send them down in small parties with Jacquot leading the way.

Delange followed next and not until almost everyone was gone did Boucard lower himself over the edge. He felt tired and the thought of the long climb downwards disquieted him. But he forced himself on. This was the most dangerous moment; the perimeter undefended save for Hennessy and his men; a tiny rearguard firing into the darkness. He could hear their muskets popping off and thought how cold and desolate it must be, left alone there, facing thousands of unseen Arabs. It would be comforting, firing at random into the night; conscious that the noise was covering a scrabbling on stone, a desperate breathing, a slowly moving line of nervous men.

Nervous, the whole dark mountainside smelt of fear. Even Jacquot who led the advance party had had a face as white as chalk when he had gone over the edge. It was a mercy the

darkness obscured the height. He could see nothing ; only the dim black outline of rocks which loomed up underneath his boots, causing him to panic in case he might go crashing down.

For an hour, the Colonel stumbled on. He could hear Zeller behind him and was nervous that he might slip and fall on top of him. Twice, he had to put out his hand to catch Zeller as he shot past. The last time, he had gripped him by the arm. "Not so fast, young man," he had whispered. And Zeller, although he was over forty, had been cheered by the quiet confidence that seemed to radiate from Boucard's touch.

The worst was over by the time the moon had risen. It came gradually, picking out the slithering dark figures and outlining the jagged boulders. They were still a long distance from the floor of the valley, but the steepest and most dangerous part now lay behind. Boucard could pick out the dark patch below that must be the fort. He was out of breath and his heart was pounding. He had begun to wonder whether he would ever have the strength to get down. But he had brought these soldiers here and now he owed it to them to bring them into safety. If his lungs burst, he would go climbing downward. His hands were cut and bleeding, but he hardly noticed the pain.

He had been thinking during the time he had been slithering downward. Sometimes he wondered how long they would be able to hold out in El Oud. But he was certain Lebel would hear the firing and send the news back by the telegraph. What occupied his thoughts was something more powerful and unpleasant. He did not want to meet de la Motte ; did not want to be tried by a court-martial in Oran.

But, logically, that was the only way it could end. Unless he blew his brains out—which he had no intention of doing. It was an odd failing, ambition. But in the final judgement, he knew himself to be right. He had taken two decisions ; one to go forward, one to go back. Each time, he had acted because he knew there was no other alternative. But he had lost the best part of two hundred men. And nothing, nothing on earth would ever explain that.

I'm finished, he thought, loosing his handhold and falling until he came up against a rock with blinding force. He welcomed the pain because it abated the tumult in his mind. But he found it hard to get up again and had to pause before he had the strength to go on.

"How are you bearing up?" he said to Zeller in a voice that concealed his agony. He had always been a bit of an actor. You had to be if you wanted to drive men to the utmost. He heard Zeller's reply and was comforted because he knew that Zeller depended on him. He decided that he must fix his mind solely on the man. Nothing else must come between their safety which he was confident he could assure. He tried to push the phantom out of his mind. But, after a little while, it returned and kept him company all the way down into the valley.

Somewhere Gounod was edging downward, prodding with his musket stock. He had a natural faculty for seeing in the dark and knew exactly where the nearest Zouave was panting in front. He would have preferred to have gone with Captain d'Auberon's party and the three horses. They must be somewhere over on the left where the track wound downward into the valley. But if the Colonel wanted it this way, it was no use grumbling. In any case, he might have been lying up there with a ball through his head like young Lieutenant Crespín who had died a few moments before they were getting ready to carry him down. No, he wasn't worrying about the mountain; not like some he could mention. But his mind was occupied with the problem of the Colonel. It wasn't good—the way he went about it. He was in too high spirits; too full of confidence; putting it on to encourage the others. Gounod was used to that. But this time there was something deeper behind it; something Gounod did not like.

It wasn't natural to stake everything on one throw and then lose with such good humour. Besides, he knew what Boucard must really be feeling and the two did not fit together. After all, both of them knew what was waiting at the other end.

It was odd how you got to know a man. It had taken him years to figure out the Colonel. That business about not wanting an orderly. Gounod shuddered when he recalled

their conversation. Struggling with him to get his clothes to brush ! He almost giggled. At first he'd been convinced it must be an act ; no officer would be so stupid unless he was one of those politicals. There were plenty of them ; professional Republicans. But gradually, he had come to understand that Boucard was only acting naturally. He was good and honest right down to the marrow. Gounod had cause to know all about that.

We're like two old men, he thought. Sitting in a chimney corner and grown crochety with each other. But if anyone else sticks his head in, then we're like a pair of nutcrackers coming together. In his way, he loved Boucard ; loved him in a manner that it would have been impossible to put into words. " Me and him," he muttered to himself. " Time we reached an understanding about what's going to happen after this." He had a sudden vision of the Colonel, talking in his sleep and the picture hurt since he knew that this was one place where he was unable to be of help.

It was almost dawn when they reached the floor of the valley. The moon was fading and Boucard strained his eyes to catch sight of Hennessy and his Zouaves who must have started some time ago on their journey downward. But he could see nothing in the unreal light and felt anxiety lest Hennessy might have left it too late. When he turned towards the fort, he found Gounod close beside him.

As they walked towards El Oud, they met d'Auberon coming forward. His face seemed to have aged prematurely in the last twenty-four hours. Even in the half light, Boucard could recognise the difference.

" My men are in the fort, Colonel." D'Auberon was thinking how simple life had become since the previous morning. He felt now that he had aged in a curious way which gave him added strength. He was confident and unworried ; almost glad to be in this desolate spot with its evil memories.

" Have you put anyone in the sangar ? " Boucard's first thought was for the water.

" Oursel and four troopers, Colonel. I've lost so many horses, my men must needs be infantry. And I've brought all the wounded I could. Some of them died on the way.

The others I've put in the hut. I've seen their water-bottles are filled. I wish to God we had some jugs or bottles."

"We must do what we can." Boucard found an idiotic sentence going through his head: man cannot live by bread alone. Of course, it was in the Bible.

God! What was he thinking about; d'Auberon, the horses. It was as though the climb had slowed down his brain.

"D'Auberon," he said.

"Yes, Colonel."

"How are the horses?"

"A bit winded, sir."

"It can't be helped. Pick two of your fittest troopers and get off down the valley to Sagun."

"And leave you here, Colonel?" D'Auberon was suddenly conscious how greatly he desired to stay in El Oud.

"Leave me here?" Boucard repeated. "Who do you think I am?" He was busy stuffing his sweat-drenched shirt back into his breeches.

"I'm sorry, Colonel."

"That's all right, my boy. I know you'd like to stay. But our lives depend on you. If Lebel hasn't heard the firing already, he'll certainly do so when they attack this morning. If he has a grain of sense, he'll have reported it on the telegraph. You'll probably find someone on their way to help. But if anything goes wrong—" Boucard paused, buttoning his trousers—"then I rely on you to use your brain."

"I won't fail you, Colonel."

"I don't think you will."

They stared at each other quite silently. Then d'Auberon saluted and ran towards the horses. Boucard could hear him calling to the troopers and stood watching as they mounted. He saw d'Auberon turn and wave and felt affection stirring in his heart. "Suffering and experience made a man; there was no other way." If I've achieved nothing else, I've turned that boy into a soldier, he thought. He listened to the noise of the hooves fading rapidly down the valley.

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As it grew lighter, he was able to see Hennessy's Zouaves

swarming down the rocks. As yet there was no sign of the Arabs. He hurried about, ordering the men to knock extra loopholes in the walls and found Audincourt superintending ten Zouaves digging a pit with their bayonets. The ground was desperately hard and the noise was like a scrabbling and chinking in a blacksmith's.

"I thought we might fill it with water," Audincourt said. He was smiling; had enjoyed every moment of the last twenty-four hours. As he loaded and fired up on the perimeter, he had talked and shouted to the Duzair. At last, he was meeting him face to face; both had guns in their hands. He felt immeasurably free; all the memories of the last weeks had fallen away. He glanced upward at the mountains. Soon the Duzair would be back at him. This was no struggle in a cramped cell. He hardly heard the Colonel speaking.

"Cut branches from the mastick trees," Boucard was saying. "Good long branches with plenty of leaves. For the men," he said angrily as Audincourt stared, "and for you too if you don't want to die of thirst. Fill that hole with water and stick them in." He was worried about the number of men in the fort.

Long before Hennessy had reached El Oud, the mountain ridge swarmed with Arabs. There was a burst of firing and then a raucous shouting, wafted gently down to the defenders. The green standard waved and then vanished, replaced with other banners that bobbed up and down in agitated motion. Then the Arabs began to clamber down the slopes. They came from all sides; down the track and along the gorges. Like a host of disjointed small white figures.

At the summit, the green standard had appeared again.

"I T can't be much longer, Colonel." Zeller looked away from the mountains and down at the three Zouaves who were working desperately on a home-made tricolour.

"No," Boucard grunted, "perhaps another half-hour." He was conscious of an odd impatience.

"How is it going?" Zeller said to the Zouaves.

"Almost finished, Commandant." The Zouave looked up from his handiwork and smiled. "What with Mignot's tunic and the Colonel's sash and that white shirt Captain Audincourt gave us, we'll have as fine a flag as you could wish." He bit off a piece of thread and returned to his sewing.

"Better than that green abomination up there," Zeller said cheerfully. He looked quickly at the Colonel and found that he was smiling.

"Nail it up," Boucard said when they were finished. He spoke loudly and cheerfully, knowing the value of confidence in a moment when men were prone to doubt themselves. He watched two Zouaves climb up onto the hut, saw the nails knocked in with the heel of a boot. He took off his cap and waved it in the air. "Vive la France!" he shouted, knowing his action would fire their enthusiasm. He listened as the garrison began to cheer; a hoarse ragged sound that grew stronger until it finished with a flurry of caps and shakos.

Going along the walls, Boucard found the men in high spirits. In one embrasure he came on Mignot, squinting carefully down his carbine.

"You—Mignot—you are still alive, eh?"

"But yes, Colonel. It takes a lot of lead to kill an old soldier."

"Still missing your chum. What was his name—Piechut?"

Mignot's face darkened. He nodded. "Up there, when we charged in, I gave 'em something to remember Piechut by. There's a few of those Arabs won't be murdering anyone no more. How are you keeping, Colonel?" He looked at

Boucard with all the familiar assurance of an old soldier who, in a tight corner, still knows his place.

"Not bad, Mignot, not bad at all. We're going to have a hot time. Don't shoot off all your ammunition." He nodded and went on, chatting and joking with the men packed tightly around the walls. They were pleased to see him, smiling and exchanging back-chat; proud of a commander to whom one could talk as man to man. They stared after him with affection and then turned to making their preparation with added zeal.

Boucard had the gate opened and walked across to the well. He knew the Arabs had seen him, for a few shots banged off in the distance. Their sharpshooters were creeping forward; like white lizards, darting from rock to rock. In the distance, he could see horsemen coming down the track. He longed for a cannon and cannisters of grapeshot.

Oursel was in the sangar and came quietly to attention.

"You have not got much protection here." Boucard looked at the heaps of rock that formed the parapet.

"No, sir. But my men are fair marksmen."

"But, man, you've hardly any field of fire. If it wasn't for that water, I would not put you in this position. But it's got to be held, you understand. At all costs."

"I understand, Colonel."

"Oursel." Boucard was distressed. "I don't like leaving you here," he said.

"Colonel," Oursel said quietly, "we can look after ourselves." His look was almost gentle.

"Very well," Boucard said gruffly, "we'll come out to you at nightfall and fill our water bottles." He stumped away, conscious of a deep disquiet.

In the fort, he found an atmosphere of growing tension. Zeller had taken over the work of quartermaster; had collected all the food and was now sorting it into neat piles of biscuits and dried meat on the floor of the hut.

"We can make this last for four days," he said cheerfully as Boucard came in.

"It's the water that worries me."

"We shall be all right, Colonel." Since he had confided

his dream Zeller had regained his composure. Besides with Boucard here there was no use in worrying. "We have plenty of ammunition," he said. "I told the men to empty the pouches from the dead."

"And what about you?" Boucard turned to the Corporal who knelt amongst a row of men lying at the end of the hut.

"Not good, Colonel." The Corporal rose slowly to his feet. "It was that damned mountain that did them. I could only get six on the horses. The others had to be carried."

Boucard looked down at the exhausted faces. Only two had their eyes open and, seeing the Colonel, they made shift to nod and smile. But the others lay as though they were already dead, their faces ashy white and their bandages dark with heavy stains. Boucard nodded to the Corporal and hurried outside.

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Half an hour later, without any warning, the Arabs rose up from amongst the rocks and surged towards the fort. They came silently and in great numbers. And watching them, Boucard was conscious of the tremendous tension inside the walls. In a moment they will begin to shout, he thought. He patted the musket which had served him as a crutch down the mountain and glanced at the nearest faces which were staring at the approaching tribesmen.

"Hold your fire," he shouted. He peered through the loophole to where the Arabs were coming forward, spilling out from behind the rocks. They moved at a steady pace; mostly on foot but with horsemen amongst them. He looked for the green banner, but could not see it; other banners were tossing like corks amongst the flood of men. It was hard, this waiting. He could feel the tension rising amidst the soldiers. The man next to him was breathing like an organ; great rasping gasps of excitement. Others fidgeted with their muskets, licked their lips, smiled foolishly or stared through the loopholes with bulging eyes.

"Fire!" he ordered when at last he was satisfied. He ran along the walls, hardly noticing the tremendous noise that

followed his words. With each volley the sound flew backward with the smoke, hitting the wall opposite, and rebounding on the line of soldiers half hidden in a cloud of blue-grey smoke. Boucard organised them into two parties. As one crouched down, firing through the loopholes, the other reloaded ; hands ramming down charges ; mouths spitting musket balls into upturned muzzles. Then the muskets were ready and the soldiers took over the loopholes ; firing into the mass of Arabs ; shouting with excitement, their teeth showing white in bearded faces, mouths open in idiotic grins.

Their fire was hitting the Arabs who seemed suddenly to falter. Men were falling to the ground, collapsing into white bundles that lay motionless or writhing ; vanishing beneath the feet of their companions who hesitated to go on. Then the banners waved, the faltering ceased and the line swept forward again. Bullets began to smack and patter against the walls. The noise of confused shouting was like a wall of sound ; irresistible as it surged towards El Oud.

As he loaded, Boucard felt splendidly alive ; conscious he was meeting a challenge that demanded he stop worrying about the future. He was unaware of the men falling beside him, unconscious of the wounded who groaned and tried to drag themselves from beneath his feet. The crash of firing was an intoxication. He swore as he rammed in a charge and spat the bullet out of his mouth. The musket barrel was growing hot. He took over from a soldier who stepped back to reload. Then he saw the Arabs, close now, close enough to pick a target. He squinted along the barrel until he found a victim. An Arab with an arrogant face carrying a yellow banner. He was careful taking aim. The musket banged off and the Arab sat back in his saddle amazed. He began to topple, slowly, and then more quickly as his frightened horse leapt forward. He fell sideways, hanging from the saddle and Boucard stepped back, to make room, conscious of fierce pleasure.

The Arabs now came on as though glorying in the firing. It tore gaps in their lines, but more men came forward, running and leaping like dervishes. They surged towards the fort, leaving a great trail of men and horses spread-eagled

behind. And as they ran, they shouted ; fierce prayers or a stream of meaningless yelling that rose up out of their hearts in a fierce joy that anticipated the destruction of the Roumi.

When they reached the ridge, they surged across it towards the fort. A cloud of smoke hung over the parapet ; motionless, like some internal combustion in the scorching atmosphere. They did not hesitate, but ran right up against the walls, leaping like agile cats, clawing at the parapets and firing their muskets into the loopholes which showed black in the grey stone.

Inside, the heat and smoke formed a choking cloud through which men moved as shadows ; sweat pouring down their blackened faces. Even the bayonets seemed dulled ; thrusting and stabbing as fresh faces appeared over the parapet ; leaping with a concussion that threatened to jerk them from their clips as the muskets exploded, throwing burning wadding onto the white robes ; echoing with tremendous thunder-claps in the confined space.

There was confused movement all along the parapet.

In blackened tunics, or stripped to the waist, the soldiers fought with quiet but disciplined ferocity. As each Arab appeared, he was shot down or bayoneted ; falling sometimes into the midst of the defenders where he was thrust through again or clubbed on the head until he lay quiet and staring beneath the trample of boots and the unearthly din.

Boucard moved among them like a primitive warrior. His face was stained, he was bareheaded, but his voice yelled encouragement that could still be heard. He ran from one wall to another, jumping over the bodies, thrusting with his sword at the fierce faces which stared down ; heartening his men so that they would have cheered had they possessed the breath. With him ran a trumpeter from the Zouaves, a pistol in one hand, his trumpet clasped in the other. At a sign from Boucard, he blew call after call, the noise rasping from the brass ; rolling up to dominate the other noises like a strange music that accompanied the battle.

In the sangar, Oursel heard the trumpet like a wild bird in anguish. It brought tears to his eyes because he knew that this time it was checkmate ; that never again would he play

chess. He saw the Arabs coming over the crest and settled his carbine against his shoulder. He would take a few with him ; just a few pawns. He began to fire, reloading with a trained dexterity that had always stood him in good stead. Beside him, the troopers were silent ; firing with calm desperation. Oursel began to whistle. He was not exactly afraid, but an animal seemed to be clawing at his heart.

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It was Hennessy who noticed the Arabs coming over the far wall. First one, jumping down, whom he shot through the head immediately. Then another and a third until a steady trickle was seeping over the parapet. For a moment they appeared uncertain, peering through the smoke which was now so thick and choking that the soldiers had not appeared to notice their presence.

Hennessy began to run. He collided with Audincourt and was nearly flung to his knees. Audincourt's mouth was open. Hennessy saw that his tunic was split and he was bleeding badly from one shoulder. But his eyes were like those of a maniac ; large and fixed. He pointed to the Arabs and they ran on together.

Their rush seemed to take the tribesmen by surprise. Driven against the wall, they became uncertain ; trapped in the Roumi den. Audincourt ran the first one through the chest, wrenching out his sword and Hennessy had to protect him, cutting at a big tribesman who stepped forward with an upraised sword. For a moment they seemed alone ; locked away inside the greater battle. Then Hennessy saw an opening, thrust through, felt the sword run home. And then the soldiers came running and, in a few moments the remaining tribesmen were scrambling across over the wall.

Audincourt pursued them. He thrust upward, skewering an Arab on the parapet. So powerful was his thrust, that the man fell sideways, wrenching Audincourt's sword out of his hand and vanishing over the wall. Audincourt stared after him. It was as if the man had been the Duzair himself. Perhaps it was, he thought, perhaps I've really killed him. He'll never be able to torture me again. He was conscious

of a blow in the chest and began to clutch at the wall for support.

Hennessy knelt down beside him. He could not tell whence the shot had come. He was surprised how peaceful Audincourt looked ; as though he were smiling. But it was no use—he got hastily to his feet.

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The Emir watched his men launch themselves fruitlessly at the walls. In the first rush, it had seemed they would sweep over them, but the Roumi musketry checked and hurled back each fresh assault. Only one tiny fortress had fallen ; a mere outpost and the Emir did not guess its significance. He was furious the assault had failed ; angry for having permitted it to take place. This fort was but a pawn in the larger game. It should have been swept up in the first moment. Now it threatened a greater venture. He could tell the tribesmen were tiring and found himself wishing the French prisoner was beside him to advise him. He brushed the ridiculous thought away. Then he cantered in the direction of his regulars ; negroes in red fezzes and white jibbas who were firing happily towards the fort. It should be they who would engage the Roumi whilst the tribesmen drew back. He was angry and his voice was high and cracked as he shouted orders.

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“They are going. I do believe they are,” Zeller panted. With tired eyes he stared through a loophole, the pistol still tightly in his hand, as though he found it impossible to believe the ordeal ended.

“You’re right, sir.” It was hardly possible to recognise Mignot beneath the black mask. His eyes were deep hollows, his hair stood on end. But he nodded and grinned like a grotesque clown.

The Arabs were melting away. A moment ago they had been poised beneath the walls, angrily hurling themselves at the parapet, like wildcats baulked of their prey. Now they were going, flitting away across the sand whilst bullets pattered

against the walls. Here and there an Arab turned, shaking his sword in their direction. But the great wave was crushed, split up into small scurrying parties. It had broken against El Oud, shattering its strength, drained by the musket fire and the struggles on the walls. Now it was going back, sullenly, towards the sheltering rocks. The sunlight glittered on the swords and lances. A haze of dust rose up around them.

"Keep firing," Zeller shouted. He was distressed to find how exhausted he felt. As he walked down the line, he was conscious how small the garrison now seemed. Before the attack, the walls had been crowded. Now, the soldiers were in ones and twos; blackened, exhausted, but grinning as they watched the Arabs going back.

"Keep firing," Zeller said again. He kept stepping over the dead who lay at curious angles where they had been dragged back out of the fighting. At one loophole he found Jacquot, firing his pistol at the Arabs.

"Take a musket," he said grimly, "there are plenty of spare ones. It carries farther and you won't hit much with that popgun."

"No, Commandant." Jacquot was struck by Zeller's appearance. He looks like an old man, he thought. He had seldom seen anyone look so weary. He picked up a musket and found that it was loaded. Thrusting it through the loophole, he took aim. As he pressed the trigger, a bullet smacked into the stone beside him. For a moment he was startled. "But that's how it is," he said aloud.

Zeller organised the soldiers into a continuous line and kept them loading and firing with disciplined precision. He knew this was the time to inflict casualties but was worried about the brisk fire that was coming into the fort. At frequent intervals, a musket ball would hit the inner wall and flatten itself against the stone. He cursed the Arabs hidden amongst the rocks. He found Hennessy and sent him to the opposite wall to see what had happened to Oursel.

It was then that Gounod came plodding from behind the hut. His face, like everyone else's, was blackened and drawn. He saw Zeller and made towards him, coming to attention

and saluting as though on the parade ground. There was a bullet hole in his shako, but the brass strap was jammed firmly beneath his chin.

"May I speak to you, Commandant?"

"What is it?" Gounod's expression was so impassive that Zeller felt alarmed.

"It's the Colonel. He has been wounded. But no-one is to know. He's round the back of the hut, sir. Wants to speak to you."

"Is it serious?"

"You know what he is. Won't let me look. Tied on a bandage himself. But I don't like the look of him. He's stopped one through the chest. "You'd better come along, Commandant," Gounod said, blinking fiercely.

As Zeller hurried after him, Hennessy clambered down from the roof of the hut.

"There is no one left in the sangar," he said quietly.

"No-one?" Zeller could only think of Boucard.

"Everyone wiped out. Hennessy's face was grim.

"I see," Zeller said, but the realisation that their water was gone had not yet penetrated. He was obsessed with the Colonel and walked on, wishing Gounod would hurry.

CHAPTER 26

COUDIN listened intently. He had cocked his head sideways, savouring the distant noises that were quivering in the mountains. They appeared to come from the direction of El Oud. And that was strange when you considered where the column was supposed to be. He listened again, glancing at the Lieutenant's strained face. He despised Lebel, since the last days.

"It's a battle, no doubt of that," he said firmly.

"Are you really sure?" Lebel was peering towards the mountains. He hated them with a passionate loathing; had hated them ever since Coudin had called him onto the parapet that morning to listen to the flat echoes that whispered from their direction.

"That's a battle," Coudin said decidedly, "and a big one. We must do something, Lieutenant." He looked to see how Lebel was taking it.

"There are less than fifty men here," Lebel said hastily. He was reluctant to make up his mind. Possibly the noise would stop and they would be left in peace.

"That's enough at a pinch. We could start right away and be at El Oud by midnight."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Lebel could not keep the panic out of his voice. "And leave Sagun undefended?"

"Something has got to be done," Coudin said stubbornly, "and mighty quick by the sound of it." He was trying to make his mind imagine what had happened. Things must have gone wrong, he was sure of that. But the pictures would not form properly. He gave up the effort; relying on an instinct which told him that something bad had happened. It was no skirmish. They must be firing volleys. The noise was flat and dull, yet his ears could distinguish the sudden breaks; not continuous sound but a sort of jerky cracking.

I can't take a decision like this, Lebel was thinking. He had a sudden vision of his tiny column, cut off in the Duzair valley; without water and surrounded by hordes of screaming

tribesmen. He was incapable of marching his men towards El Oud ; he could admit that to himself. But what was the alternative ? As an officer, he was bound to go. He found himself half hoping the others would never return. It would be so easy , there could be no reproaches. But he pushed that thought back hastily. He was aware that Coudin was staring at him ; had been conscious of his stern disapproval for days.

"There's the telegraph, Lieutenant."

"Yes." Lebel's mind seized hungrily on the idea and then rejected it.

"You should have sent a message days ago." Coudin's voice came needling at him.

"Be quiet, Coudin," Lebel snapped viciously.

He was trying to think, trying to arrive at some conclusion. He had known immediately what must have happened as soon as he had seen that first message. There had been another, equally imperative—and then silence. He should have informed Oran days ago. There was no denying it. But he had been haunted by an image of Boucard's face ; large, ferocious, livid with anger so that the scar bobbed up and down. He could hear the Colonel's voice. Night after night, it had been with him in the empty hut. It had been impossible to sleep ; impossible to think clearly. He had sat dithering, unable to make up his mind. He imagined what would happen to him in Oran if the expedition failed. A court-martial, a firing party in some deserted spot as it was growing light. He could hear the words of command, feel his body shrinking away, flinching behind the paralysing darkness of the bandage. No, he had muttered, struggling with the fear. No ! But then Boucard had come up beside him. A Boucard flushed with success and full of blinding rage. What if the Colonel had been successful in the face of authority ? Then his own position would be worse, much worse because he would be branded ; an officer disgraced because of his disloyalty. So what was he to do ? It was beyond the vivid power of his imagination. He had sat trembling, obsessed with the silence and his own fear. If only he had been born with courage ; had chosen any career but the Army.

But now, there was no escaping a decision. It had to be made ; something cried out to be done. And Coudin, beside him, was aware of his predicament ; aware, but without sympathy ; only a terrible disgust, a loathing that showed with every expression of his face.

"Well, what about it, Lieutenant?" Coudin had no conception of what was tearing Lebel apart. He thought the officer a coward and not fit to be in command. But beyond that his mind was preoccupied with the column. He could think of nothing else. And gradually there grew in his mind a certainty that he must take matters into his own hands. It was unheard of, strictly against everything he had been taught. But it had been done before in Africa where nothing went according to the copy-book.

"What about it?" he repeated, hoping Lebel might pull himself together.

"Leave me alone," Lebel shouted. The rasping enquiry in Coudin's voice was driving him mad. If only there were someone else ; someone who would take the authority.

"Look, Lieutenant, let me put it this way. I don't think you are well."

"What are you talking about?" Lebel looked at him quickly, nervously.

"I don't think you are well," Coudin repeated, his big, peasant hands grasping the parapet. "And what's more," he went on, choosing each word carefully, "you'd be better in your cot. Let me take over a bit. Come back when you are feeling better."

"There's nothing wrong with me. You are getting above yourself, Coudin."

"That telegraph, sir—are you going to send a message?" Coudin knew he had to try brute force.

"You shouldn't talk to me like that. I haven't decided yet." Lebel could not understand what Coudin was getting at, but sensed the malice. Why do they all hate me like this? he thought, the tears coming into his eyes. Aloud, he forced himself to say: "That's all, Coudin. I don't need you any more."

"You're wrong there, sir." Coudin let go of the parapet and stood up straight. Here we go, he said to himself. He

knew exactly what he must do. "Duty is duty, Lieutenant," he said, "it sticks out plain as day. You've got to send a message, that's what you've got to do."

"Oh, shut up!" Lebel longed to hit him.

"Shut up? With Colonel Boucard out there! I'm a soldier, Lieutenant, with fifteen years' service. Not a boy to be told to shut up. I can wipe my own nose, thank you, and I know what's happening up that valley."

"What are you going to do about it?" Panic made Lebel's voice jeering.

"I'll tell you just what." The Lieutenant's voice had stung Coudin to sudden rage. I've got to keep a grip of myself, he thought. He clenched his hands together. "I'm going to send a signal," he said.

"You are what?" The colour drained out of Lebel's cheeks. He stared at Coudin as though from a nightmare. He saw the hard blue eyes, the lines sunk deep in the leathery skin, drawn tight around the mouth.

"Are you going to send it, or shall I?" The voice was inexorable. Lebel hesitated.

"You can't do it." His voice was a whisper.

"Then you'd better watch me, Lieutenant. Remember everything I've said. It will come in useful when you make your report."

"You can't do it," Lebel repeated, terrified, knowing the man meant what he said.

"With your permission." Coudin came suddenly to attention and saluted. "I may not be able to spell like an officer but I know what's got to be said." He stared into Lebel's eyes, noting their feverish glitter. He felt no emotion, only a certainty that he was doing what was right.

"Then it's your own responsibility." The words came out with a rush. Coudin looked at him with utter contempt.

"You can't do more than you know is right," he said in a steady voice. He began to walk towards the telegraph.

* * * * *

"Piatte," Brosset whispered.

"Yes."

"Don't raise your voice. Just keep talking quietly. I know this sentry. He gets anxious if there is any noise."

"Very well," Piatte whispered weakly. He was lying on his back, bound loosely with cords. Even now he felt no curiosity that Brosset should be here, had hardly listened to his tale of captivity during the long days when they had thought him dead. Nor had he been able to listen to what Brosset was saying about the Emir. Ever since he had regained consciousness, it had been like this. Every time he moved, a knife-like pain went through his ribs, causing him to wince and lie still, praying it might stop. He hardly heard Brosset's voice ; strings of words stood out here and there, making sense in his dream of pain.

"I've got to get through." Brosset's voice seemed to go up and down. "If only I could untie these cords, I could give them the slip and get through to the fort. We could do it together. I could carry you."

"No," Piatte said. "I could never make it. This bullet in my ribs." He forced himself to go on talking.

"Don't worry, Henri. I'll get you through somehow. I know these Arabs. I've studied them. They are tired and dispirited now and soon they'll sleep. But it's these cords ; these damned cords." Brosset stirred violently, twisting and turning.

"Brosset"—through the waves of pain, something had penetrated into Piatte's brain. It was a word Brosset had used—cords. Of course. His mind was clearing. "I've got a knife," he said, "in my boot." He began to edge himself forward, trying to cheat the pain in little rushes. But it leapt on him, swift and implacable. He let out a low groan.

"Take it easy, Henri. Have a rest and then try again." Brosset had got himself into a sitting position. They were behind two big rocks, isolated in the starlight. Ever since they had been brought here he had had but one idea. But Piatte was wounded ; half delirious. He had talked aloud on the mule's back all the way down the mountainside. Brosset had walked beside him ; trying to alleviate the constant bumping. He could not understand what Piatte was saying ; odd sentences about a monastery all mixed up with

women's names. He could hear him breathing now ; like an animal that had dragged itself away to die. And yet, he had a knife. It was not possible to leave him in peace.

" Henri," he said after a silence, " it's our only chance. They have not tied you so tightly. Can you move ? " He stared at Piatte's outline, hearing the breathing begin again. He had broken out in a sweat with anxiety.

Piatte was edging his arm downwards. Every movement hurt him, but, after a time, it seemed dulled ; joined into one great agony that was outside himself. He could not believe he was really there. He felt convinced that he must be detached ; floating somewhere up amongst the stars. He had fixed his mind inexorably on the knife. It was like a penance ; a terrible penance that he must fulfil before he could gain peace. He felt something give inside and lay still whilst waves of nausea swept through him. He was cold ; cold as death. It chilled him, paralysed his hands. " Oh, God," he prayed, " let me succeed in this one thing." He began to pant, drawing his leg up closer inside the cords.

Brosset waited, fearful but excited. The knife was uppermost in his mind. He was sorry for Henri—but the knife, the knife. He could almost feel it in his hands, could imagine the cords parting, the incredible sense of freedom. He heard Piatte panting again and could hardly bear the waiting. The seconds seemed stretched out so that they would never end. If only Henri would hurry.

Piatte's hand had almost reached his boot. It was groping downward, full of pain so that each finger felt swelled to bursting. He kept repeating to himself, " I must, I must," biting his lips and trying to stave off the agony. At times, he thought he must be dying. It was impossible to endure so long. He must be dead and this, some echoing pain that he had left behind — purgatory, an act of attrition ; something outside his experience.

At last, his fingers touched the leather. He pushed them further—another inch—and felt the hilt of the knife. It was ivory ; a beauty left him by his father. Painfully he drew it out, sliding it up his leg until it toppled over and fell onto the ground. Only then was he able to relax. He felt the agony

draining away. With a great sigh, he lay backward, staring at the stars.

After a time, he grew conscious that Brosset was whispering again. He nodded his head in answer. It was a moment before he could bring himself to speak.

"It's here," he said.

"I'll roll over towards you." Brosset was filled with sudden tenderness. Now that the tension was over, his sympathy flowed back in a great rush. He would have liked to tell Piatte how grateful he was.

Softly he began to roll, over and over until he felt Piatte flinch away as their bodies touched. "My hands, Henri," he whispered. "Can you free my hands? If I can get those loose, I can do the rest." He waited, feverish whilst the slow, painful movements began again.

After a time, he could sense that Piatte had got hold of the knife. He did not speak, but soon Brosset felt its edge sawing gently at the cord. It occurred to him that this was just like the stories he had read as a boy. Only those stories had not an underlying accompaniment of pain. He was wondering whether he could bear to leave Piatte behind. Henri was too bad to make the journey. He would have to do it on hands and knees; would first have to settle with the sentry. Then it would mean crawling flat on his face towards the fort. And with Boucard there, the sentries would be on their toes.

No—there was not a hope of Henri being able to accompany him. All that talk of carrying him was rot; poured out to encourage him to make an effort for the knife. Brosset felt bitterly ashamed. For an instant he wondered whether it would not be better to kill Piatte; it would save him so much suffering. But how could one hold thoughts like that in one's mind, when the knife was sawing slowly through the cords. How could you imagine such things when a man was giving you his life so you could escape.

He tried to imagine what the Emir would do when he discovered the escape. He would be angry, furious because, in his own way, he had grown fond of Brosset. He was a civilised enemy; a fine man if it came to that. He knew

why he was fighting and did so with a selfless zeal that inspired respect. Brosset remembered the stories he had told him ; the long tale of defeat, the wanderings in the desert, the innate determination that had forced him back again and again in what he believed to be a crusade.

But wasn't it a thin veneer ? At heart he was probably like the others ; bred from a savage line that had killing in its blood ? He longed to be back in the fort where the issues would appear unconfused. He had been too long out here ; too long, so that his mind had grown morbid with the rights and wrongs of this war. He was suddenly aware that the cords were parting and forgot his doubts in a rush of exultation.

With his hands free, he rolled over and took the knife from Piatte.

"Thanks, Henri," he whispered, as his friend sank back exhausted. With swift strokes, he cut through the remaining cords, slipping them off until, finally, he was free. He stretched his legs and arms with fierce pleasure, feeling the circulation flooding back. He rubbed himself tenderly, aware that now he must speak to Piatte.

"Henri"—his voice was trembling—"do you think you could make the effort ?" He listened for the reply ; knowing what it must be, yet hoping against hope.

"No," Piatte said after a long silence, "I'm afraid I can't do it. I might walk a little way, but it would only spoil your chances. You go on. It doesn't matter about me."

"But it does matter. It matters terribly. I can't leave you here alone."

"You go on," Piatte repeated. He was beginning to wish that Brosset would go ; longed now to be alone.

Brosset was silent for a moment. He had known this must happen, but it did not lessen the pain.

"Very well, Henri," he said at last. "But I don't like leaving you, truly I don't."

"Don't worry." Piatte found himself smiling. "I've got a lot to think about. I'll be all right here. Just go on. Give Colonel Boucard my regards."

"I'll be back to get you out of this place, I swear I will. You may depend on it—if it's the last thing I do."

Piatte made a great effort. Half sitting up, he said :

“ For Christ’s sake go.”

“ Very well, Henri.” Brosset was hurt. He does not believe me, he thought sadly. Then he began to think about the sentry.

Piatte saw Brosset loom above him. Then there came a firm pressure on his hand. Brosset was lifting it ; through his pain, he felt a light kiss against the skin. He felt suddenly peaceful ; the pain draining away. He lay back, staring at the stars, hardly conscious that Brosset was creeping silently towards the Arab.

HENNESSY rubbed his eyes and stared into the darkness. The moon was behind a bank of dark clouds. His throat ached and the images of water had begun to trouble him. He knew them as old enemies and fought them, turning his mind into the future which seemed cold and merciless as the distant stars.

He had been in tight places before, but never with the same sense of premonition. It had begun when Boucard was wounded ; as though they were Romans who had lost their eagles. It was the Colonel who had brought them here, had sustained them—even in that humiliating decision to retreat. And now, he had been struck down. It seemed impossible. Yet that was the truth and the whole garrison had felt it as a personal calamity.

Thoughts went flooding through his mind. Where was d'Auberon ? Had he got through to Sagun or was he lying, mutilated, in some gully ? Then there was the water ; the men in the sangar dead and every approach to the spring under heavy fire. There was only a drop left in his water bottle and the pit that Audincourt had dug had been found dried up after the attack had died away. Poor Audincourt, he had seemed glad to die. Now he lay with the others in a heap behind the hut. There was nowhere else to put them and digging was an impossibility in that hard ground.

Boucard had refused to be carried inside. He lay now, asleep, only a few yards away ; covered with Gounod's cloak, and breathing noisily. Hennessy wondered whether he was dreaming. He glanced at Gounod ; awake and sitting beside the Colonel.

When he was that age, would he be equally reluctant to die ? He could not imagine what it must be like to grow old ; humiliating perhaps, but it must have its compensations. He was aware how passionately he wanted Boucard to live ; how necessary he was in a country like Africa where men depended on each other and, in times of crisis, looked perpetually for a lead.

If he grew old, he hoped he would be like the Colonel ;

essentially a man ; a human being who stood right out from amidst the coarse trappings. That was the ideal in a soldier ; courage and experience bound up in a personality that could inspire ; that could demand sacrifice yet never exploit it. He sighed and shook his head, wishing that the heavy sense of gloom would pass. Then he became aware of a noise, a tiny scraping somewhere out in the darkness.

He saw the shape moving within a few moments ; straining his eyes until they hurt. It was a man crawling towards the fort, crawling very slowly. It was unlikely to be an Arab ; not unless there were others. He stared again, but could see nothing.

Slowly, the man came nearer ; a dark shape, snaking its way over the ground. Hennessy looked at the sleeping soldiers. He wondered whether to wake them, but it seemed unnecessary and they were exhausted ; sleeping like dead men pressed against the ground.

He beckoned Gounod, who rose reluctantly and came and stood beside him. For a long moment, he stared through the loophole. Then he straightened his back and looked over the parapet.

"I reckon it's one of ours," he said in a low voice.

"Piatte ?" Hennessy had a sudden vision of Henri crawling on his face.

"Could be," Gounod said. He longed to be back beside Boucard, but forced himself to stay with the Captain ; waiting as the minutes dragged past.

At last there came a low whistle ; a thin, piping sound that seemed to fade with the breeze.

Cautiously he leant over the parapet, staring down at the figure below. Then it seemed to rise up out of the night, a hand clutched the stone and Hennessy seized it, pulling with all his strength. There was a noise of scrabbling and then Gounod had him by the shoulder. They pulled together and heard a low groan. The man's feet came up and he almost fell on top of them. They dragged him upright, staring as if he were a visitor from another planet.

"It's Lieutenant Brosset," Gounod said, surprised.

Brosset could only nod. His arm hurt and he could still hardly breathe. He felt them lower him gently until he was

sitting against the wall. Only then could he really believe he was safe.

* * * *

The Colonel was awake early. He felt the pain stirring deep inside and steeled himself to another day. He knew he was badly hit. Any fool could tell that. But Gounod had plugged the hole and the bleeding had stopped. It was only inside that he could still sense the trouble, like a trickle that restricted his breathing. Sometimes it was as if water were washing about in his lungs. But he had got to last. He had got to make the men believe there was nothing to it.

When Gounod told him about Brosset he felt better. He sent for the Lieutenant who came and knelt beside him.

"You are like a homing pigeon, my boy," he said dreamily.

"That's how I breed my soldiers and you've done me proud. They've knocked you about, I see."

"Yes, Colonel, but that's of no importance."

"Of course not." Boucard was happy to see the young man back. "Like this scratch of mine," he said. "Nothing to it. I'll march out of here on my feet."

"Don't talk so much, Colonel." It was that damned Gounod ; like an old nurse.

"Tell me what's happening out there," he said, edging his back into a more comfortable position. He sat listening whilst Brosset poured out his story.

* * * *

With the dawn, the Arabs began firing at the fort again. The bullets smacked against the walls, now and again penetrating a loophole and humming viciously in the cramped space. On Boucard's orders, only the sentries were on their feet. The others lay flat, listening to the bullets, chewing a little biscuit and growing steadily more conscious of their thirst.

An hour later, the firing stopped. There was a sudden quiet and Boucard wondered whether he should send a party to the spring. But on both previous occasions his men had been driven back, losing heavily so that only two had come dashing through the half-open gate. We'll try again when we are half-crazy, he thought. He knew the effect which sun and lack of water could exert and had no illusions. Years

ago he had had to shoot a soldier under the same circumstances. He had never forgotten the man's eyes ; a mad creature with a swollen tongue. And that's going to happen again, he thought, wondering what d'Auberon was doing.

"Colonel!"—the voice was cracked and excited—"there's a horseman coming towards us. He's got a white flag."

"All right," Boucard said. "Let him take his time." He guessed why the Arab had come and was in no hurry. It could only be to ask for terms. The thought cheered him. Even lying here with a musket ball in his chest he was achieving something.

"Gounod," he said, when he could hear the hoof beats. "Get me on my feet. Don't stand staring, man. Get the Commandant to help."

"No, Colonel."

"Damn you. Whilst I've got my breath you'll take orders. Go and fetch the Commandant. And don't stand there like a mule." The effort tired him, but he watched Gounod walk gloomily towards the hut with a grim satisfaction.

"Please, Colonel," Zeller said, coming out of the hut.

"Nonsense. Get me on my feet." He had to choke down a cry as they lifted him, but once upright, he found it easier to breathe. "Let's go to the gate," he said, panting, but determined his legs should not give way. He began to walk, slowly, leaning on their shoulders.

The Arab sat his horse outside the gate ; dignified, impassive ; waiting for the Roumi leader to appear. His eyes took in many things ; the drawn faces, the dead bodies, that curious shrinking of the skin that comes with lack of water. All these things he would report in due course to the Emir. But, meantime, he stared at the Colonel who had now appeared with two men close beside him. For a moment, it occurred to him that the Roumi might be wounded. But he could only see the upper half of his body. Then the Frenchman stepped forward alone and leant his hands on the top of the gate.

"Why do you come thus?" It was a big proud face ; a warrior, the Arab thought, admiring the firm lines, the scar that ran right down one cheek.

"My master sends me to offer you terms," he said in his indifferent French.

"What terms?"

"He does not wish that blood should be spilt needlessly. If you surrender, he will guarantee your lives."

"Surrender," Boucard said, wondering how much longer he could go on standing. He wondered suddenly if this expedition had really been in vain. What if d'Auberon had got through and de la Motte had sent that flying column that was searching for the Leopard somewhere in the mountains? He recalled that conversation in Oran. The column must have started days ago. It must be somewhere close to them by now.

"Tell your master," he said slowly, surprised at the strength in his voice, "that a French officer does not accept terms. Not while this flag is flying." He jerked his head painfully towards the human-made tricolour. "Tell him also that French soldiers die but they do not surrender." He was short of breath, panting painfully.

"I will tell," the Arab said impassively. "But I am also to tell you that you have half an hour to consider this offer. If by that time you do not surrender, we shall attack."

Boucard did not answer. He was fighting to keep upright. He stared at the Arab who, after a moment's hesitation, wheeled his horse and trotted off over the flat ground. Boucard found suddenly that Gounod had hold of him. Very slowly, he allowed himself to be led back towards the wall.

"Gounod," he said after he had rested for a time.

"Yes, Colonel?"

"There's a box in the hut. The Zouaves must have used it as a chair."

"Possibly, Colonel."

"Bring it out, man. I want to sit on it. They'll be attacking soon and I don't want to lie here like a baby. Go and fetch it, Gounod."

"Very well." Gounod got to his feet and stood looking down at Boucard. It hurt him to see the Colonel lying there. It tugged at his heart and made him feel quite giddy. He went into the hut without a word and came back dragging the box.

"That's it, Gounod. Now put me on the box. Prop me up a bit so I can see what is going on."

"Yes, Colonel." Gounod's throat jerked convulsively. He would rather have had the court-martial ; anything except this.

"Stop blubbering, Gounod, you bloody old fool. I'm not going to die on you yet."

"No, Colonel."

"Remember, you old crow, there are a lot of young soldiers here."

"Yes, Colonel." Gounod gave a terrific sniff.

"Then haul me on to this box. I want them to see me. I want them to know that Colonel Boucard still commands this fort."

* * * * *

Half an hour later the sentries called out that a party of men was coming forward on foot. From where he sat on his box, on top of Gounod's cloak, Boucard could see through a loophole. But his eyes kept clouding over. He thought he could see the figures, but was not sure. They bobbed up and down like targets at a shooting stall. But gradually, out of the mist, appeared a limping figure in a tattered French uniform. Beside him walked two Arabs, supporting him so that he did not fall. Even at that distance Boucard knew it was Piatte.

Piatte moved forward very slowly. He was in great pain but his mind was clear and recognised exactly what he now must do. He was hardly conscious of the Arabs who supported him though vaguely they reminded him of the shouting of the guards when they had discovered Brosset gone and an Arab lying dead. Then a confused conversation ; with the Emir's eyes, penetrating through the cloud of pain. He was to tell Boucard that he must surrender. That was it. He plodded on ; the pain knifing through his ribs.

He had lain very still after Brosset had gone. Everything had been quiet when the pain receded so that his mind became clear. He had thought about many things and, in the end, it had all amounted to one conclusion. Surely God would understand, surely He must. And, at last, he had realised that it could not be otherwise. He was surprised and happy because it could not be any other way. After a time, he had slept ; waking early when the pain began again.

Now he could see the fort, coming closer with every step.

He hoped Brosset was inside. Somewhere, far away in his mind, he remembered talking to Brosset outside the gates—but that was long before this trouble began. He began to will himself to be stronger. In a moment he would have to shout and that would hurt. He thought of Boucard and that gave him strength. He began counting the steps.

* * * * *

Boucard stared grimly through the loophole. He had no illusions. He trusted Piatte ; was utterly certain that he would behave in only one way. Out there—utterly alone—he represented France ; was the personal symbol of the tri-colour nailed to the flag post. He swallowed hard, his dimmed eyes bulging with emotion ; aware that Brosset stood beside the parapet, clenching and unclenching his hands.

Fifty yards from the fort, they saw Piatte stop. He was silent, seeming to gather all his strength. Then his voice came floating clearly to the garrison ; every word heard plainly in the profound silence.

“ They have sent me here to tell you to surrender. But I say fight on. Keep faith.”

The sound of a pistol shot came drifting across, followed by a tiny puff of smoke. Piatte crumpled suddenly and swayed to and fro. Almost before he had fallen, the Arabs had seized him by the legs, running towards the rocks and dragging him, bumping heavily in the dust.

“ Don’t fire,” Boucard said sadly. His weakness had caused his eyes to fill with tears. Piatte had chosen a way that demanded courage. He bowed his head ; praying for strength to go on.

“ Colonel. In God’s name, look at that ! ” It was Brosset, his face livid with rage. “ Look at that,” he screamed. “ It’s Piatte ! ” He pointed with a hand that shook to a head waving on a pike.

“ Mignot,” Boucard said. He spoke quietly, knowing that anger would only drain his strength.

“ Colonel.” The bandy legs appeared in front of his eyes.

“ You won the prize for the carbine last year ? ”

“ Yes, Colonel.”

"Then shoot that Arab with the lance."

"Yes, Colonel," Mignot said with alacrity. He ran to a loophole, pushed forward his carbine, looked out to where the head that had been Captain Piatte was jerking triumphantly to and fro. "Just one moment, my friend," he muttered, "just a little to the left, if you please." He waited patiently and then pressed the trigger. He knew he had not missed. The lance fell forward suddenly; Piatte's head disappeared from view.

"Thank you, Mignot. Remind me I owe you a bottle when we are back in Sagun."

"It was a pleasure, sir. The Captain always treated me right."

* * * * *

"Listen," Boucard said, some time later when the surviving officers had gathered around him. "You've experienced something that few soldiers are privileged to know. You have seen a man give up his life for his comrades. Remember it when you are old and tell it to your children. And there's no cause for grief," he went on quietly, leaning back on his box and fighting against the pain. "Piatte would have wanted it that way. No one likes to die," he cried, "but if one has to go—what better way could you choose?"

"Now, listen gentlemen. We have been set an example. In a little while the Arabs will attack again. You know now what is expected of you. Look into your hearts and see you do your duty. Now get back to the walls. And good luck—all of you." He lay back, utterly exhausted, craving water, his throat swollen; yet conscious he had the strength to go on.

* * * * *

Within twenty minutes, the sentries shouted that the Arabs were advancing. Boucard opened his eyes and pulled himself painfully upright on his box. He nodded to Gounod, who silently handed him a pistol.

"If I fall off, you must tie me on this box."

"That won't be necessary, Colonel Boucard. I'll be right here at your elbow."

"You're a good fellow, Gounod."

D'AUBERON slid off his horse and felt his legs trembling. He saw Coudin's face as the gates swung open and half staggered into the fort, leading his exhausted horse. Somewhere the two troopers must be following behind. But he had forgotten everything but the necessity to get to Sagun.

"Where's the Lieutenant?" Even through his weariness he thought it strange Lebel should not be there."

"He's not well, Captain. He is in his hut."

"Well, get him out, Coudin. Bring him here. I don't care if he is dying."

"Captain, may I have a word with you?"

"Talk away, but hurry. Colonel Boucard is in El Oud."

"I reckoned that was what was happening. But the Lieutenant——" Coudin paused, wondering whether this officer were old enough to understand. But the drawn face, the eyes, set in deep hollows, reassured him.

"I'll put your mind at rest, sir. I sent the message yesterday. Another one came in an hour ago. I've got it written down. But I remember what it said."

"What?"

"A flying column is already operating in that area. Another column will reach you at Sagun on Thursday. Give it every assistance. Collect all information available."

"So they are coming." D'Auberon forced himself to smile.

"Thank God," he said quietly, and began to feel giddy.

"Sit down a minute, Captain."

"It's water I need."

"Hey, Martin, a jug of water for the Captain. Take his horse, Buffon." Coudin slipped his arm beneath the Captain's. "This way, sir. Put your weight on me. I know what it is like to be dried up with thirst. Why! you have not got a water bottle."

"Left it at El Oud," d'Auberon muttered, "where they need it." He let Coudin lead him to the fig tree, sinking

against its broad trunk, watching hungrily as a soldier came running with a brown stone jug.

Coudin watched the Captain drink. He had seen thirst before ; experienced it so that it took its place amidst the hardships life sent, like sandstorms or bitter cold. He felt a vague sympathy, but it was clouded by the realisation of what had to be said. He cleared his throat.

"What's happened, Coudin ?" D'Auberon was conscious of a blossoming all through his body. It was like being born again ; delicious, sensuous ; a knowledge of well-being. He splashed the remaining water over his face, feeling it running through the mask of dust.

"It's like this, sir. The Lieutenant is high strung—like a blood mare." Coudin coughed cautiously.

"What's that to do with it ?"

"Only this, Captain. After you'd gone, just an hour or so, a message comes in on the telegraph. If I may say so, it seems the Colonel should not have gone off into the mountains."

"What do you mean ?" D'Auberon sat up, suspicion growing in his mind.

"Just what it said, sir. Orders on no account to leave on a razzia. It mentioned another order, too. One that must have come earlier."

"You mean, one the Colonel must have seen ?"

"That's what I do mean. And I told the Lieutenant he ought to send a message, saying what had happened. But he didn't agree." Coudin could sense the tension.

"And what did he do ?"

"Nothing, sir. That was the trouble. He could not make up his mind. I kept on at him, but he put me in my place. A Sergeant has to go cautious when that happens."

"You mean to say that nothing was done—nothing ?"

"Not until we heard the firing. I know for certain something had gone wrong ; got a feeling in my bones. I said to the Lieutenant, 'Look, sir, you've got to do something now.' But he turned nasty and told me to shut up."

"Coudin ! Are you telling me——"

"I'm making my report, Captain. When the Lieutenant would not take action, I said to myself, well, someone has got

to do it. And seeing there wasn't anyone else, I took it on myself. Begging your pardon, Captain, I know that's not in order. But odd things happen out here and I knew it would not be the first time."

"So, you sent the message."

"Yes, I did, Captain. I sent it off just as though I was responsible. Here it is," said Coudin, producing a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. "I got the signaller to write it down for me, seeing what I done was irregular."

"Colonel Boucard won't forget this. We all owe you a debt." D'Auberon got up and stood staring at the Sergeant. Beneath the sunburn, Coudin's face had gone pale. His mouth was slightly agape. He fingered his beard.

"I only done what I knew was right."

"Thank you, Coudin." D'Auberon put out his hand.

"I'm glad you don't hold it against me." Coudin was pleased and impressed with the new authority the Captain had gained. He wasn't like that when he left here, he thought.

"And now, what about Lieutenant Lebel?" D'Auberon was conscious of a growing hatred. He was worried that Colonel Boucard had disobeyed orders and the anxiety was finding vent in a loathing for Lebel.

"He's queer, sir. When I sent that message, he went right off his head. Shouted at me that I had the responsibility. He kept on nagging at me all day—with his eyes looking as though they were going to drop out. Then, near evening, he had a sort of fit. I found him holding on to the parapet, talking to himself. You know how it takes people," Coudin said, "so I put him in his hammock. Since then, I've been looking after the fort myself."

* * * * *

Lebel was lying, staring at the ceiling. He heard the door open and was suddenly aware of d'Auberon's dust-stained face. The expression was hard and evil. He sat up with a start.

"What do you want?" he shouted.

"I want to know what you have been doing. Nothing, so far as I can make out."

"Leave me alone." Lebel's mouth was working up and down so that the harelip twitched as though in agony. He cowered back in his hammock which swung wildly to and fro.

"I want an answer." D'Auberon gripped the hammock and stared into Lebel's face.

"An answer. That's what you want." The eyes seemed to dilate with fever. "I suppose you've come here to arrest me?" His voice was high and squeaky. "Well, you can do what you like. I don't care. I'm finished. I'm finished. Do you hear?" he shrieked, staring into d'Auberon's face so that his breath hit him in hot, mad waves.

"Lebel." D'Auberon looked at him in dismay. "Have you gone crazy?"

"Crazy! That's a good one. Yes, I'm crazy. But I've more sense than the lot of you. I don't want to be court-martialled and I don't want Colonel Boucard humiliating me. I won't have it. Do you understand? I'm not a soldier like you. I hate it. I hate it," he repeated passionately. "I'd rather die than go out there again. I can't. I can't." He put his hands to his head and broke into a torrent of weeping. D'Auberon stared at him. The sobbing seemed to fill the little room. He stood, staring at Lebel, whose shoulders were shaking in convulsive heaves. After a time he went away and shut the door, glad to be out in the hot sunlight where Coudin waited, his head discreetly bowed.

BOUCARD lay back against the wall. He felt cold, chilled right through and yet the thirst would not leave him. He chewed a leaf from the mastick tree, trying to wring out a taste of moisture. After a time he spat out the chewed leaf and turned his head with difficulty in Zeller's direction.

"Zeller." He could feel that his voice was going. That last attack had drained his strength. He had bounced about too much so that the blood seemed to well up inside his lungs. At one moment, he had thought the fort lost. The Arabs were over the wall; like mad animals. Somehow, he had got to his feet. Then Hennessy had come and he had been able to fall back on to the box.

"Colonel." Zeller looked twice his age. Like an old, old raven that was losing its plumage. His face had dried up and was coated with dirt and smoke. He moved slowly as though it cost him an effort.

"We've been through bad times, you and I." Boucard was distressed at the effort it cost him to talk. "It's time to look matters in the face," he said hoarsely. "How much longer can we hold out?"

"Two days, Colonel. We are almost out of ammunition. But it's the water." Involuntarily his eyes moved towards the sangar.

"Getting restive are they?"

"No, Colonel Boucard, the soldiers aren't restive. They all saw Piatte. They know why we are here. It's just that—well, one can't go on without water. We've had three days of it. Every man has his limit."

"You know what I've been thinking?"

"No, Colonel." Zeller's eyes were dim with compassion. The Colonel's big frame seemed to have shrunk. He looked old and very frail, wrapped in Gounod's cloak.

"It's strange how much one thinks, lying down here. Never had the time before. Now I've got no excuse. I've

been thinking about the Leopard. If we can keep him here, there's a chance, just a chance that a flying column might catch him. We haven't done badly, holding him up as we have. Do you think I'm right, Zeller?" He looked up with big childish eyes.

"Of course you are right." Zeller could not bear much more. He could accept the thirst, the tiredness, the wounded dying for lack of water. But not this. He choked.

"I'd die happy if I thought so."

"Please, Colonel. Don't talk like that."

"I'm dying, Zeller."

"You must not say things like that, Colonel."

"Don't fool yourself. But I'm not going just yet. You see, Zeller, I've got to get you out of this place. I brought you here and I'm going to get you out."

Zeller could only nod his head.

"I've been thinking about it. You know, I always was one for breaking orders. Even when I was a boy." His mind wandered off and he had to struggle to remember what he had been saying.

"Yes, yes, of course. There's an unwritten order in Africa. Always adhered to it up till now. 'Never leave a wounded man to the enemy; never under any circumstances.' How many wounded are there?"

"Only eight. The others——"

"No water, eh?"

Zeller nodded his head.

"And with me, that makes nine. Well, the nine of us are going to hold this fort whilst you slip out."

"Don't be ridiculous, Colonel Boucard. You know we can't do that."

"Zeller. You listen to me. As your commanding officer, I order you to obey. If we are not relieved by tomorrow night, you'll lead the survivors out in the darkness, and get down to Sagun."

"Colonel, I *will* not do it."

"Oh!" With a terrible effort, Boucard heaved himself upright. "Since when have you taken to talking like this?" he asked.

"You are asking the impossible. I can't do it."

"You will do it." Boucard fixed his eyes on Zeller and exerted all the will-power that was left. He felt it as a last challenge to his failing body. But he would, he would. He saw Zeller drop his eyes. "Then that's settled," he said. He dropped back and was silent, fighting for breath. Great shafts of red light seemed to fly above his eyes, so dazzling that he could not recall where he was. When, at last, he opened his eyes, Zeller was still there, his white face staring down in agonised suspense.

"You're still there?" he said.

"Yes, I'm here."

"Don't hold it against me, Zeller. It's the only way." Zeller could find no words.

"There are nearly a hundred men left. They've done all they can. Now it's time to go. Quite simple." Boucard closed his eyes. "Tomorrow night," he said in a clear voice.

* * * * *

He opened his eyes some ten minutes later. Zeller was still there and Hennessy was standing beside him. And that was—yes, it was Gounod bending over him.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"Just making you comfortable," Gounod said.

"Don't touch the bandage," Boucard said sharply.

"No, Colonel. I won't touch it."

"That's good." He closed his eyes again.

Vaguely he wondered if he were really dying. It did not seem possible. You wouldn't feel so peaceful. People died struggling against something unknown; not drifting as he was doing; drifting quietly as though it did not matter. He opened his eyes again.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"What, Colonel?"

"The attack, man, the attack."

"It's all right, Colonel, we've beaten them off." It was Hennessy.

All at once, Boucard realised he was in the fort. They were

all standing round him. His mind became clear. He felt the pain again. But there was something he wanted to say.

"I forgot to tell you"—even his voice felt stronger. "It's for when you get back. Zeller knows already but there'll be a lot of questions asked. You ought to know the truth." He could see them staring at him. "Fetch the others," he said.

Jacquot and Delange came hurrying. They stood with solemn faces.

"I ought to have told you," Boucard said hoarsely. "I brought you here against orders. It's a long story and it doesn't matter now. I used my own judgement. I was right, but we had bad luck." He paused for breath. "When they ask you what happened—you didn't know. You obeyed my orders. Understand? I'm just telling you this so it won't come as a surprise. Don't look so solemn." He almost chuckled. "You'll all learn in good time. A soldier obeys his intuition, that's all. But he must have luck."

"You are talking too much," Gounod said roughly. "You take a rest, Colonel." He had forgotten his own thirst.

"All right," Boucard said tolerantly. "But just one thing else. Zeller, tell de la Motte that my luck ran out on me. He'll know what I mean." He closed his eyes and went wandering off into a strange, quiet place.

* * * *

In the middle of the night, he woke to find Gounod sitting beside him. He put out his hand and Gounod clasped it, chafing it to dispel the icy cold. He worked silently. At last he could bear it no longer.

"I've been talking to the Commandant."

"You have?"

"Seems that you and me are going to stay behind in this place."

"Only me, Gounod. You'll go with the others."

"I said me and you."

"Don't argue with me, Gounod. I'm very tired." Boucard's mind was clear again.

"When I first come to you, Colonel, I took on a job. It doesn't end because a garrison marches out of a fort."

"I'm grateful, Gounod. I'm very grateful. But you'll go just the same."

"Look, Colonel, I can't talk like you can, but I know my own mind. I don't go out of this place without you and that's a fact."

"Gounod!" Boucard no longer had the strength to be angry. "Don't you see? It's the best way. You know what would happen if I got back. They'd even strip me of my medals. It's better here. It's better here," he repeated.

"That's what I've been thinking all along."

"You're an idiot!"

"I've no doubt I am, Colonel."

"You're a —— Gounod." Boucard paused for breath. "And what's more you're a stupid ——"

"I dare say. Now you lie still and stop talking. Here—this will never do," Gounod said, picking up Boucard's limp hand and beginning to rub, again whistling gently through his teeth.

CHAPTER 30

AS soon as d'Auberon saw the dust rising from the far ridge he ran down the steps, shouting to Coudin to open the gate.

"They are coming," he shouted, and the fort seemed suddenly to spring to life. Soldiers came running onto the parapet, shouting and pointing. There was a clatter of hooves below, where the troopers who had arrived the previous night were slinging on their saddles and pulling at straps.

Coudin stood beside the gate, shading his eyes. He had been up all night, listening on the parapet. At dawn he had heard the noise of firing, flickering faintly from the mountains. At least, they are still alive, he thought, wondering how many men were hidden behind the dust cloud.

"It's the flying column," he said tonelessly to d'Auberon.

"My God. About time too. It seems days since we got that message."

"Only forty-eight hours, sir. It's just seven o'clock now."

"Seven. So we could reach them this evening."

"If you ride hard, sir."

"I'll go out and meet them," said d'Auberon, consumed with anxiety. He had slept for a few hours, but images of the garrison in El Oud had appeared, continuously, to trouble him, so that he had developed a nervous itch, kept scratching his cheek.

"Bring my horse," he shouted. He was unable to stand there any longer. "You take over, Coudin. I'll be back." A thought kept coming into his mind again and again. Something about the sands of time running out. He put his foot in the stirrup, glad to get started.

* * * *

Colonel Saint Cloud was in good humour that morning as he rode with his small staff, well ahead of the column. Out in front, a troop of Chasseurs were trotting across the dusty ground; the Colonel had a theory of his own about the use of Scouts.

He saw the horseman through the cloud of dust and wondered what sort of garrison Boucard had left in the fort. A ham-fisted old fool ; no flexibility, no finesse. It was fortunate the days of the old men were coming to an end. There were too many still cluttering up the Army List. It was high time the younger school came forward. And this time, it looked as though—he twirled his moustache with long, thin fingers ; pinching out the grit that nestled there from the cloud which constantly accompanied them.

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D'Auberon rode up and saluted the Colonel. He stared in astonishment at the Chasseurs ; two squadrons, and the long line of marching soldiers. And there were cannon ; dragged by real artillery horses. He was lost in admiration, but then remembered El Oud.

"Captain." The Colonel's voice was neat, meticulous. He was perfectly turned out ; a new tunic and a cap from which the sun had not yet drained the colour.

"Colonel," he said, "I rode out to meet you. I left El Oud four days ago. It was surrounded then. They can't hold out much longer."

"You came out of El Oud ? Is Colonel Boucard still alive ?"

"He was when I left. But I fancy they must have run out of water. There was only a little sangar." D'Auberon's voice trailed away, thinking of the frail barrier of rock.

"I'm pushing my column as fast as I can. We shall stop at Sagun for water. Then straight up the valley. You'll accompany me ? I don't know the route too well."

"Yes, Colonel. I'll come with you."

"That's settled then, my dear Captain. And now, permit me to make one small observation. Your uniform, monsieur, a little *outré* for a flying column ?" His voice was hard, but petty. And looking down at his torn tunic, d'Auberon hated him with all his heart. Boucard would not have bothered with niggling details when men's lives were in danger. He contented himself with saying :

"Excuse me, Colonel. Life has not been easy these last days."

"Is it ever easy in Africa? Don't take it to heart, Captain, but detail is something on which I insist; even under the harshest circumstances."

"Yes, Colonel."

"No doubt you will be serving under my command in the future. It's best to make one's opinions clear. You agree, of course?"

"But yes, Colonel."

"I'm glad. I don't hold with slapdash soldiering. An officer must set an example." His small eyes took in the tattered Captain and rejected him. He wondered if all Boucard's soldiers were like this.

Oh Jesus, d'Auberon thought, as he rode beside him. He remembered Coudin saying that officers were like a lottery; you might draw lucky, but the chances were against you. He looked at the Colonel's medals and was glad to see there was no croix. He began to long for Boucard with a dreadful nostalgia.

* * * * *

Coudin had not neglected a single detail. He had locked Lebel in his hut, seen to the guard, stationed the trumpeter at a spot where he was nicely visible against a bastion. He was not taking chances. When columns appeared, you never knew who was going to walk into your parlour. Probably some cranky martinet whose brains had boiled away in the sun. He wished he had warned the Captain, but he had ridden off at a moment's notice.

He gave the trumpeter a signal and heard the notes flow clear and harsh across the desert. He walked down the line of bearded soldiers, waiting to present arms. Not bad after months in a mouldy fortress. He was almost pleased.

But the image of Colonel Boucard kept nagging in his mind. It wasn't right a man like that should take things into his own hands. Then he remembered Lebel. I suppose there's a time for everything, he sighed, gazing up at the tricolour which floated above Sagun.

He was still worrying about Boucard when the clatter of hoof-beats grew overwhelmingly loud. He took a pace for-

ward and froze into rigid immobility. Then he began to bark orders ; fiercely, though the words hardly appeared to come from his mouth.

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later, the column was on the march again ; the guns bumping and rolling so that they raised great clouds of dust. The Caid watched them go with an expression that might have indicated satisfaction. He sat beneath his palm tree, speculating on what the Duzair tribesman could do with so much money. It was a matter for himself alone. But wise advice, offered from an open heart, never came amiss. Now there would be peace again. He watched the guns and horsemen and the foot soldiers. Perhaps it was as well. He settled himself more comfortably. Soon, he would send for the Duzair who had taken to lodging in the village.

" Shall we be there before evening, Colonel ? "

D'Auberon could not stop watching the Colonel. He did everything with such neat precision ; that perpetual gesture, twirling his moustache. He was small and dark, probably just under fifty. His eyes were perpetually on the scouts. He talked in short, clipped sentences.

" Probably, my dear Captain. Very probably. There's still a little firing. I can hear it quite plainly. Oh, I know you are in torment, but please be calm. I assure you it's only a little swan song."

" A swan song ? "

" Exactly. We shall drive the Arabs up into the mountains. They'll retire fast enough because they can't cope with my guns. But there's a surprise awaiting them."

" A surprise ? " d'Auberon echoed dully. He was obsessed with images of Boucard. He recalled El Oud, that time when Brosset had been overrun. If only this man would hurry. He hardly heard his words.

" Another flying column. De la Motte is no fool. He sent it this way immediately he heard the Leopard was across the frontier. Foresight, vital in war. And that column has been forced marching for days across the mountains. With good timing—and I flatter myself that our part of the programme

will not go amiss—we should catch the Leopard right between us. Right between us,” he repeated, fingering his moustache.

“But——” D’Auberon was brought up short ; the words cut through his thoughts. He stared at the Colonel.

“You look surprised. But this is war. This is how wars should be fought.” His voice failed to conceal the satisfaction.

“War demands constant changes,” he explained, smiling at d’Auberon’s puzzled face. “Oh, we had to scrap all the old conceptions. Africa has been going on too long. It needs new men, new ideas.”

“But Colonel Boucard said——”

“Colonel Boucard. Now there’s an excellent example. A brave man, Boucard, but a fool.”

“Colonel.” Rage rose up in d’Auberon’s throat.

“You listen to me, Captain. I’m talking plain sense. The man was a fool. He’d been so long in this country that he imagined there was nothing new to learn. Men get like that and Boucard learnt his trade in prehistoric times. Who else would have taken a garrison into the mountains ? Who, I ask you ?”

D’Auberon was silent. The Colonel spoke of Boucard as though he were already dead ; broken and flung out on the scrap-heap.

“You see——” That idiotic man was talking again. D’Auberon could have leant over and hit him with his fist. “—There is not room any more in a modern army for men like Colonel Boucard. His day went long ago. War is a matter of scientific thought, strategy, planning that’s directed over a whole country. It’s a new type of warfare and it demands new brains. We can make use of the old virtues, indeed we need them. But in a subordinate capacity ; controlled and used to the best advantage.”

“There’s a gulley straight ahead. We’ve got to go round it.”

“Thank you, Captain. But there’s an extraordinary feature about this affair. Boucard acted against orders. He’ll be broken, of course. There’s no doubt about that. Yet his action has given us an advantage. It’s put the Leopard in a position we’ve been hoping for for years. Pray-

ing for it, in fact. And Boucard, in his ham-fisted way, has put this opportunity into our hands. Right into our laps, as you might say. It's extraordinary."

"Yes, Colonel."

"I don't suppose he ever realised it for an instant. He is not that type of man. You can't get new ideas into an old man's head. New wine into old bottles!" he cried. "It's an absurdity. He should have been retired years ago."

D'Auberon could find nothing to say. It hurt him deeply that Colonel Boucard should be spoken of in this way. It hurt him with a curious numbing of his heart.

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Much later—when the sunset had begun to steal across the valley—the Colonel ordered his trumpeter to sound the recognition. The call went floating towards El Oud ; brazen and echoing against the rocks.

* * * * *

Colonel Boucard heard the trumpet and smiled. Though it sounded a great distance away, there was now no longer cause for anxiety. He was conscious that soldiers were running past and heard an answering call go echoing round the fort. But it seemed to come so distantly, robbed of its fierceness and dulled to the throbbing of his heart.

He thought suddenly of the Leopard who must also be listening. For both of them it must seem like a bell tolling ; a distant bell that robbed ambition of its edge. In his own fashion, he felt a sadness for his opponent. He had been a good enemy, insistent always in demanding the finest qualities. A man who forced you ruthlessly to give your utmost.

Had it been in vain ? He was aware of excited voices around him. But he was weary. Zeller must take care now of this little fortress.

El Oud—the words came soundlessly to his lips. He knew his men were in safety and heard himself sigh as if from a distance. De la Motte's face stared down at him and Boucard chuckled at its expression. It doesn't matter now, he thought. He closed his eyes, wondering where Gounod had gone.

When he opened them, Gounod and Zeller were bending over him. He heard the trumpet sound again and was conscious that something was happening ; something important because Zeller was gone. He could hear men cheering, but could not make an effort any longer and lay there, staring up at Gounod.

Gounod's face was working. His mouth went up and down and tears were running down his cheeks. But Boucard did not hear what Gounod was saying and was puzzled by his tears. Nor could he comprehend why it grew dusk so swiftly. It seemed but a moment since the sunset had begun.

T H E E N D